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With So Good a Wife: Love and Violence in Shakespeare Plays of Suspected Infidelity

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With So Good a Wife:
Love and Violence in Shakespeare Plays of Suspected Infidelity

By: Kelsey Ridge

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Introduction

This thesis began as a question of survival. Namely, how, if one were trapped in one of Shakespeare's plays involving false suspicions of sexual infidelity, would one survive? Would there be a way to tip the scale just a little bit to ensure that one does not die in the end? Those notions led me to a follow-up question: What does it mean that Shakespeare lets some couples live and love, while leaving some to die?

In an effort to explain and answer these questions this thesis will observe the competition between two forces at work in these plays, Love and Violence. The war between these forces will drive the concerns of this thesis as it drives the events and outcomes of Shakespeare's plays involving false suspicions of infidelity.

While several Shakespeare plays involve or even center on suspected-infidelity, this thesis will focus on three of them: *Much Ado About Nothing*, traditionally considered a comedy, which features the rejection of a supposedly unfaithful female partner, a rejection that the male partner eventually comes to regret; *Othello*, possibly the most famous and certainly the most violent and tragic example of the suspected infidelity problem; and *Cymbeline*, an almost entirely overlooked and under-appreciated member of the canon, which truly highlights how to survive as a lover in one of these plays. These plays do not represent the limit of the Suspected Infidelity plays,¹ but they form a solid core and showcase the range.

Although *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Winter's Tale* also address this issue, they diverge in important ways from the basic model. *Merry Wives* forms an extreme on the category, a comedy in which the suspicious spouse practices no act of violence or repudiation

¹ Shakespeare plays in which a male partner believes his female partner has been sexually unfaithful – *Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Winter's Tale*, and *Cymbeline* – are not generally classed together, as they span genres and periods. However, Edward Dowden's creation of the term romance to describe Shakespeare's final plays indicates that classifications are, to a certain extent, flexible (Bloom 649). Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, plays involving false suspicions of marital infidelity will be classed together.

against his spouse, leaving her barely any need to forgive him. Moreover, in that play, the suspicion springs not from Master Ford being informed that his wife has already been unfaithful but rather his being told that a man intends to seduce her. *The Winter's Tale*, on the other hand, breaks the mold in a different way: the jealousy in that play comes not from being told that his wife has been unfaithful but from Leontes' own imagination. Although this difference may not seem significant, the fact that the idea of the affair comes from himself and not another person means that the suspicion, the jealousy, and the guilt are all entirely his. It takes suspicion and mistrust to a level beyond what one sees in the other plays, as he does not have the shield – the word of a trusted male compatriot – that the other doubting husbands have. These plays are valid for discussion in the Shakespeare canon and even in the question of marital infidelity; however, they will be discussed only in passing.

For the purposes of this thesis, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, and *Cymbeline* will be classed not necessarily according to period – with the exception of early or later; instead, the focus will be on the outcome. As the old joke says, in tragedies you die, and in comedies you get hitched. A comedic ending will involve the maintenance or securing of the romantic relationship. A tragic ending will involve the dissolution or even outright destruction of the relationship or the couple.

Of course, in actual life, there would be a middle ground between the comic and the tragic. If these plays represented only human realities, characters could opt out of these relationships; they could leave their relationship and continue their life elsewhere without their offending partner. Desdemona, for example, could have left her husband and returned to Venice, embarrassed and alone but alive. Imogen could have permanently moved to Wales with her brothers and Belarius. These women could have learned to be happy in these situations, despite

the disappointing or heart-breaking end of their marriages. However, ordinary human realities often do not make good high drama, and one must assume that Shakespeare had no intention of writing a weak or middling play. If Desdemona had simply left Othello and returned to Venice or if Imogen had simply moved to Milford Haven, while that outcome would have been sad, it might have qualified as less than moving. It would also have required accepting divorce or legal separation as the end result of marriage, which some modern viewers would argue constitute a tragic if uninspiring ending for a marriage. Therefore, although this thesis does not dispute the hypothetical possibility of an escape hatch into actual reality – the idea that a character could simply opt out of the story into a more survivable scheme – we will dispense with the idea that Shakespeare would generally create such an ending. Focus will remain on the endings that exist, the happily-ever-after-comedic and the death-and-destruction-tragic.

In order to examine the arc of these plays as the arc unfolds, the plays will be examined in chronological order, starting with *Much Ado About Nothing*, moving to *Othello*, and following up with *Cymbeline*. *Much Ado About Nothing*, from 1600, represents a reasonable starting point, not only because it comes first, but also because one sees the play as strongly oriented towards a happy ending, the standard pleasing resolution audiences looking for a comedy would desire. It keeps things comparatively light without going all the way to the extreme of its predecessor *Merry Wives of Windsor*, which mostly makes light of the foolishness of the men who suspect their wives without addressing the choices the men and their wives must make. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, one feels the force of the intended comic ending driving the plot. *Othello*, from 1603, provides an instance in which the genre-orientation tilts very strongly in the other direction, presenting a full-on tragedy, complete with two shattered marriages and a high body-count. However, when reading the play, one feels the outcome to be more organic, as if Desdemona and

Othello, by struggling hard enough, might be able to save themselves and their relationship. One does not sense that anyone, especially Shakespeare, will be stepping in to save or damn the characters. *Cymbeline*, produced in 1611, really gets to the heart of surviving the Suspected Infidelity plays: how to deal with the issues of insecurity, infidelity, and violence, while securing a strong marriage and a happy ending. Furthermore, although the play does involve a deity and has something of a reputation for the use of Deus Ex-machina, as will be discussed in that chapter, the characters alone are in charge of redeeming themselves and securing their own ending.

The place to start in analyzing these plays, in charting their behavior pattern and comparative behavior, must be with the violence. Violence presents the most obvious difference among them, and therefore the first sliding scale of action and outcome will measure the degree of violence. There are, of course, many kinds of violence at work in these plays: physical attacks, spiritual attacks, personal murder, impersonal murder, slander, sexual assault, repudiation. Each of the to-be-discussed offending husbands engages in different and often multiple forms of assault on his partner before the resolution. Claudio shoves Hero and attacks her reputation, without which she cannot live in Messina, and he does not appear to care if she has suffered bodily harm when she collapses during his repudiation; however, he never progresses to murderous violence. Othello, on the other hand, engages in many acts of violence: he insults and slanders his wife; he strikes her in public; and he murders her himself. Finally, Posthumus, turns on his wife, decrying her and all women in his speeches, before trying to arrange her murder. Posthumus also strikes Imogen, though this action must be seen separately from Othello's striking Desdemona, as Posthumus did not know the person he struck was his wife. *Cymbeline* also includes repeated threats of sexual assault against Posthumus' wife, Imogen; however, none

of these threats comes from Posthumus. While some of these men come through the plays without literal blood on their hands, none of them come through without a smack of violence. These instances must all be weighed, yet they must be weighed against each other. Violence creates a curve on which to grade these plays and their outcomes; however, it cannot be the only curve.

As much as violence affects the balance and outcome of these relationships, love plays a strong role. As the plays discussed in this thesis all center around romantic relationships, it would be a mistake to overlook or reject the effects of love. True love, good love, counters the forces of violence in the plays, being a force in favor of light and joy, a force driving towards comedic resolutions. That belief, though, does not mean that love is the silver bullet or that love will always save the characters. Love helps. However, Shakespeare also includes instances in which love, tragically, is not enough. Desdemona's love for Othello does not save them. Her love struggles with his violence and loses; that loss says as much about love in Shakespeare as the victories in *Much Ado* and *Cymbeline*. Love becomes a tool, not always effective but always important, in driving towards happy endings.

A discussion of the nature of love involved in securing a happy marriage requires a solid working definition of love. After all, the definition of love in English proves subject to alterations, extenuations, and variety. In this thesis, love shall be discussed and considered according to the attributes established in First Corinthians²:

² Although most of Shakespeare's modern viewers are likely more familiar King James Version of the Bible, that edition would not have been available to Shakespeare. The King James Version was started in 1604 and was not released until 1611. It would have post-dated the plays discussed in this thesis. The available translation to Shakespeare would most likely have been the Geneva Bible from 1599, which has been quoted above. For this passage, the King James Version uses the word "charity," instead of love.

The word in question would actually be *caritas*, which translators render variously as "charity" and "love," especially "love of God." In the Greek, the word used is *agape*, which refers to the love of God or Christ for mankind. For a person to love with *agape* would be to love someone not because they are likeable but because they are a person, because they are loved by God.

Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, / Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; / Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; / Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. / Love never faileth [...] / And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (13: 4-8, 13).

In the most distilled form, this passage demonstrates that love and relationships are based on mutual trust and acceptance, factors that will be essential to the successful loves in the plays being considered. This definition focuses on the nature of love to be forgiving, to think the best of others, or at least to “think[...] no evil.” Many readers will believe that these qualities are where Shakespeare’s men, at least in these three plays, stumble and fall short. Their capacity to believe that their wives have been unfaithful and, frequently, their inability to accept their spouse’s failings create huge problems in their relationships. The female partners, on the other hand, rely heavily on forgiveness and thinking the no evil to save their relationships. Love must also, possibly even more difficult, “rejoic[e] in truth” but “believ[e] all things.” People in love must show each other the truth and believe that the other person has done the same. Although suspicions and mistrust are not wholly unavoidable, solid relationships must drive them out and avoid them as much as possible. Once again, the men struggle with these qualities, failing to trust their wives. This passage also details aspects of love in which Shakespeare’s women excel: Love must “hop[e] all things” and “endur[e] all things” while it “suffereth long.” Those values accord well with the optimism of thinking no evil and believing all things. This passage itself emphasizes the power of love, placing it above even hope and faith. Indeed, faith and hope come to sound like components of love which support and ground it. Considering how religious the characters and language of the plays are, it would be a mistake to assume one could ignore the biblical nature of the virtues. To examine these plays, one must look beyond current ideas or

ideals and examine the ideas held in Shakespeare's time, and doing so will require a contemporary standard.

One must remember, despite the way some modern readers view the love of older contexts, that these loves are not involuntary nor do they somehow overwhelm the individual's mind or will. Despite the references in some Shakespeare plays to being shot by Cupid's arrow, the loves of these plays are not so compulsory. Love, as an action, requires agency on the part of the lover. Love continues to involve actions and choices on the part of the lover. The lover must choose to pursue actively the beloved, such as Desdemona does in her relationship with Othello. A lover must choose to accept the advances of a certain individual, as opposed to others, as Hero chooses to foster a relationship with Claudio as opposed to the potentially more socially advantageous relationship with Don Pedro. A lover chooses to forgive the errors of a partner, as Imogen forgives her husband for believing that she has been sexually unfaithful and arranging for her murder. A lover chooses to think well of his or her partner, especially in the face of evidence that the beloved does not always deserve to be thought well of, as Desdemona continues to struggle to think the best of Othello, even as he becomes unhinged, shouting at her and calling her a whore. A lover must choose to hope and believe that, despite how bad things seem, the situation will be made right again, as Hero and Imogen do when their men desert them. Most important, a lover must choose to love a partner despite the fact that the partner is a flawed person, as all people are, the way Posthumus comes to love his wife. Love does not simply happen by accident. It represents a choice and an action on the part of the characters, a representation of human will used to reach out to another human being, to trust and accept them.

The emphasis on the qualities of love described in First Corinthians has not been employed to indicate that any person or character that does not meet all of these requirements

does not love his or her partner or that he or she is not dedicated to the relationship. The emphasis merely intends to bring to focus the things that are missing in the love and relationship, things that would be useful and important in ensuring that the couple can move towards a happy and healthy relationship. If Shakespeare had meant the reader to exclude all loves not built solely on the standards of First Corinthians, then there would be considerably fewer Shakespearean love stories. Although one cannot deny that many loves in his plays are inadequate or unhealthy, Shakespeare did view them as loves, as a basis from which to work and improve, on which one could begin building a relationship.

Some readers of these plays or the Bible may object to the absence in this passage of references to erotic love or desire. Given the question of sexual infidelity, these plays devote a great deal of discussion to the idea of sex and sexual desire, especially in loving relationships. Should a reader look for a way to understand sex inside of loving relationships, the love in these plays, founded on this definition, allows room for sexual desire and sexual expressions of that love. Although the men remain greatly fixated on and disturbed by sex, the women, the ones who generally represent the agents of proper love, do not have these problems. Hero, a virgin prior to the marriage involved in an entirely asexual courtship, seems to accept that sex is and will be a part of married life. Although her fiancée “never tempted her with word too large” (4.1.53), no one seems to doubt that afterwards, there will be a consummation of the marriage and more sex after that point. Desdemona does not struggle with the knowledge that she sexually desires her husband and indeed refers to sex as one of “the rites” for which she loves him (1.3.292). Although Othello denies that he wishes to bring her to Cyprus for sexual reasons (1.3.296-300), Desdemona makes no such denial and indeed seems to intend to follow him for reasons that include the sexual. Posthumus and Imogen both assert that she never had sex prior

to her marriage, but she certainly seems to expect that she and her husband will be having sex when they reunite and that they will be having sex only with each other. Posthumus promises her fidelity (1.1.110-111), and she becomes quite upset at the idea that he might have sex with another woman (3.4.48-59); however, her objections are not to sexuality per se. Unlike their male partners, the wives never trip over the idea of sex or sexuality. Therefore, one may assume that sex and sexuality are not anathema and are not distinct from good love. For these characters, sex becomes part of love and can be properly understood and embraced under the umbrella of healthy love.

Of course, despite the fact that most of the prior examples of love have involved the female members of the couple, love cannot be viewed entirely as the province of the women. In any healthy relationship, one must assume that both parties love each other properly. Healthy relationships must be based on *mutual* love, trust, and respect. *Cymbeline* builds its happy ending on the fact that the husband comes to love his wife fully, in a manner based not only on trust but an acceptance of the faults, recognizing and valuing her as a full and faulted human being. Had the love and forgiveness in *Cymbeline* come only from Imogen, it would have proved insufficient to drive the play fully to the comedic zone. Therefore, in these marriages, one cannot assume that love will solely be the women's role, the women's responsibility, the women's burden. The men must also bear the burden of bringing honest, trusting, and supportive love to their relationship. Claudio has this responsibility. Othello has this responsibility. Posthumus has this responsibility. These husbands' ability or inability to live up to this responsibility helps to effect and determine the outcome of these relationships and the plays.

These plays rely heavily on love. Although a pure and good love on one side will not be enough to save these couples or salvage a happy ending, without love, relationships and happy endings are entirely impossible. From this love stems forgiveness, acceptance, and trust, which are necessary for happy outcomes. Without a willingness to forgive the mistakes of a partner, to accept the weaknesses and failings of a partner, to continue thinking the best of a partner, no situation can be salvaged, no difficulties overcome. Without these capacities of love, no happy ending can be assured or created.

When it all comes down to it, violence and love must be seen in interaction and intersection. Violence raises the stakes, spewing out from jealousy to create the problems that the characters must resolve and overcome in their struggle for their happy ending. Love becomes the characters' tool for preventing these problems and for facing them if and when they arise. The question becomes, then, which will win out, love or violence, and which love and relationship will let one live and love in the world of a Shakespeare play.

“The only love gods”: Genre, Love, and Violence in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Although generally regarded as one of Shakespeare’s most amusing and light-hearted comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing* builds upon an issue at the heart of some of his darkest work: the damage to a relationship when a man is given to believe that his female partner has been unfaithful. Though the play follows two different pairings, Beatrice-Benedick and Claudio-Hero, this chapter will focus predominantly on the Hero-Claudio pair, as they are the couple who face most prominently fidelity and trust issues.³ When John the bastard shows Claudio falsified evidence that his fiancée Hero has been disloyal, Claudio disgraces her in public, rejecting her at the altar and informing the assembly – and her *father* – of her supposed crimes. Not until after the evidence has been proved false does Claudio begin his absolution process, re-earn his standing in the eyes of Hero’s family, and reschedule the wedding, at which point he becomes reunited with Hero, and the couple cement their union.⁴ When put next to works such as *Othello* and *Cymbeline*, one might ask how *Much Ado* maintains such a light-hearted tone and slides so (comparatively) smoothly into such a happy ending. The answer, most simply put, appears to be that this couple gets saved, rescued apparently by the playwright driving the play forcefully

³Critics and readers have generally been more interested in Beatrice and Benedick, whose relationship builds strongly on sarcastic wit, quick banter, and a shared distaste for social norms like marriage. Hero and Claudio generally appear to pale in comparison: “Of the two sets of lovers, Claudio and Hero are the ultimate products of a fashionable code – thoughtless conformists who question nothing, least of all themselves” (King 146). However, an absence of cool does not make the pairing less integral to the play’s plot or worthy of critical analysis. Harold Bloom also found the relationship lacking: “Doubtless, the title has some reference also to the vexed transition of Hero and Claudio from noncourtship to a pragmatic marriage of mutual advantage. Tiresome and empty as Claudio is, he has a certain aplomb cheerful approach to his second betrothal to the supposedly dead Hero” (200). Bloom treats their entire relationship as the movement from one appropriate state of being – maidenhood and bachelor-soldier-hood – to another – an affianced couple – to another – a married couple. One might argue that Bloom has chosen to overlook the play’s actual events, if he chooses to believe that these occurrences are bloodless and emotionless. Furthermore, one cannot characterize anything about Claudio during the repudiation scene as “empty.” As for the “tiresome” comment, that appears to be a judgmental value statement.

⁴ One should not forget that at the same time all of these events are occurring, the play gives the majority of its interest and focus to Beatrice and Benedick, Hero and Claudio’s close friends, who are also cementing a relationship during this play, though in the case of Beatrice and Benedick the couple are overcoming immense pride, slight bitterness, and overwhelming commitment issues, not trust issues. There are times when Beatrice and Benedick absorb most of the audience focus, and they divert focus away from the actions of Hero and Claudio.

towards a comic resolution. As this chapter shall show, while Hero does not represent the achievement of love and forgiveness that one sees in Desdemona, she also does not bear the inherent anger or the kind of steeliness that would make her unreceptive to Claudio's renewed overtures. Though Claudio does not present a picture of boundless trust, the play also does not give him many opportunities to ruin his own life that badly. While the twain proceed, they remain cloaked in a genre armor ready to deflect anything pulling them away from a proper marriage and satisfying conclusion. Unlike some of Shakespeare's later couples, who are made to struggle for happy conclusions, *Much Ado*'s ending appears to stem only partly from the characters' actions and instead mostly from Shakespeare's intervention to tweak things to save Hero and Claudio's happily ever after.

When examining the components leading to Hero and Claudio's happy ending, one must look first at Hero, her personality, her thoughts, and most importantly, if or why she might be willing to restore her relationship with her offending partner. One cannot overlook that Claudio got lucky in his choice of Hero – had he chosen her cousin to take to wife, Claudio would not have found himself forgiven at the end; more likely, he would have found himself punched in the face. Most critics unsurprisingly maintain that Hero does not possess the spunk or defiance that characterize Beatrice. Judith Cook certainly considers Hero one of the mild-mannered, accused women but not an impressive or exceptional one:

There is not a great deal one can say about Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. She is one of Shakespeare's suffering, unjustly accused women. Like Hermione and Desdemona, she is wrongly accused of infidelity, and in her case is literally repudiated at the church door. Unlike the other two, her fate is not tragic, and she marries Claudio in the end – although one might ask who would want him after all that? – but her main purpose is to carry the plot along. (48).

Cook does not think of *Much Ado* as Hero's show – Hero gets reduced to a plot device instead of a character and her suffering to a detail instead of a motivation. Were there any doubt that Cook

felt that way about Hero, Cook states outright that she views Hero as “a combination of foil and the need to further the plot” (45). Cook does not believe that Hero has the force of personality to drive the play, let alone to manage her future husband or life. Although one can certainly dispute Cook’s implication that Shakespeare’s accused women lack agency, it might not be wrong to say that Hero has a difficult time holding audience focus when forced to share the stage with the powerhouse of Beatrice. Walter King, as well, proves less than impressed with Hero: “The most laconic of all Shakespeare’s heroines, Hero speaks only six times in the first two acts, and then murmurs banalities or responds perfunctorily to insignificant, factual inquiries. [...] A well trained upper class Elizabethan daughter [...] she muzzles her tongue in public, obeys her father implicitly and accepts [...] the husband chosen for her” (146). He points out that she, unlike her cousin, does not call attention to herself, does not put herself center stage. He finds her too accepting of the ideas of others, too banal, too perfunctory, too insignificant. He remains unimpressed. He continues in this view, doubting not only her agency but the force behind her marriage: “Obviously she is not much in love with Claudio, whom she barely knows, nor is she supposed to be [...]. Her duty is to look charming, conduct herself decorously, and be a virgin – in order to maintain a high value on the international marriage mart” (King 146). She comports herself as she should, does not make bold with the men the way her cousin does, and becomes affianced to a suitable man.⁵ Unlike Beatrice of the “father as it please me,” King thinks Hero too duteous, too proper, too lacking in her own opinions.

Whether or not one agrees whole-heartedly with these critical readings, one cannot dispute that Hero starts the play and continues as what most would call “a nice girl.” When Claudio confesses his love for her, Hero quietly confesses only to him in his ear that she loves

⁵ A reader could easily object to King’s blithe assertion that Hero would not be expected to hold her future spouse in any affection. After all, given the emphasis placed in the play on love and being in love and falling in love, Hero would be expected to love her spouse, or at least comport herself as if she did.

him (2.1.308-310). When Claudio rejects her, she certainly never offers the level of anger or harshness the audience sees at times from Beatrice. After Claudio rejects Hero, Beatrice vents tremendous rage: “Is he not approved in the height a villain, that hath slandered, scorned, dishonoured my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands; and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancour, – O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place” (4.1.315-321).⁶ Beatrice does not scruple at violence, and one gets the sense that there can be no line she will not cross to avenge the wrongs done to her kinswoman. Indeed, if cannibalism remains on the table, nothing can be off. Beatrice clearly does not have the temperament that “suffereth long,” “doth not behave itself unseemly,” “is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil,” “beareth all things,” “endureth all things”, and “never faileth.” Instead of reaching for forgiveness or understanding, Beatrice arrives at rage. Hero, though, never displays this sort of anger. She does defend herself, and she questions why Claudio would say such things, even to the point of questioning his mental wellness – “Is my lord well, that he doth speak so wide?” (4.1.63) – yet, she does not force her stance. Indeed, when faced with Claudio’s accusations, Hero’s route remains passive – she faints. Though fainting does not quite smack of bearing all things, her reaction never smacks of anger either. Frankly, the audience hardly hears any more of her feelings on the issue before she welcomes Claudio back. Claudio evidently made the right choice for his future partner. Had he attempted to come back to Beatrice with a simple “I’m sorry,” she might actually have proceeded to eat his heart, and the play would certainly have taken a turn for the dark. Of the two, Hero certainly shows herself the more likely to accept a returning, offending partner.

In the end, Hero decides to take her fiancée back; however, the audience never becomes privy to that decision-making process. When she re-emerges, dressed like a bride, the decision

⁶ All quotations will be drawn from the 1995 edition edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine

has already been made. The audience finds itself gratified, if left largely to assume that she has forgiven him out of her love, kindness, and a willingness to accept his faults. All in all, they have an exceptionally rapid reconciliation:

CLAUDIO: Give me your hand: before this holy friar,

I am your husband, if you like of me.

HERO: And when I lived, I was your other wife:

[*Unmasking*]

And when you loved, you were my other husband.

CLAUDIO: Another Hero!

HERO: Nothing certainer:

One Hero died defiled, but I do live,

And surely as I live, I am a maid. (5.4.59-66)

Claudio, not realizing that the woman before him is his former bride, offers his hand, “if [she] like[s] of him,” and one must assume that she does, since she takes it. She simply reasserts the fact that she has not been destroyed by his slander, that she still lives, and that she remains the girl he first loved and who first loved him. Of course, one version of Hero “died defiled,” but somehow it did not take all of her love and trust for him with it. Despite what appears astounding pressure on their relationship, she keeps that love with her “surely as [she] live[s].” Now, that response looks like a love that “rejoiceth in the truth,” “believeth all things, hopeth all things,” and “never faileth.”

Of course, critics have felt differently about this acceptance. Not all critics believe Hero’s response springs solely from kindness:

The parallels [...] bring out the biting contrast produced by the difference between 'when I *lived*' and 'when you *loved*': his 'love' is no more real than her 'death', and we do not forget that the first marriage failed to take place. [...] Although she was defiled by slander, her virtue has triumphed over all efforts – and especially over Claudio's – to kill it. Her emphatic assertion of virginity pronounces Claudio guilty. [...] the new Hero is simply the old with a vengeance. (Berger 29).

If one accepts Berger’s interpretation, Hero does not take the insults lying down but instead seizes the opportunity to drive home one last time, right before promising to spend the rest of her life with him, that Claudio has made an almost unforgivable mistake and must *never* do it again.

Not exactly “kind” or “not easily provoked,” but at least forgiving enough to take him back. An audience member probably will “not forget that the first marriage failed to take place,” but Hero hardly needs to say much to bring that to their minds. Indeed, considering how glum Claudio probably looks going into this ceremony, Hero hardly needs to do much to “pronounce Claudio’s guilt.” Yet, this “old [Hero] with a vengeance” certainly shows herself like the original Hero in some respects; she apparently cares for Claudio and will accept him, regardless of the fault.

Certainly, there are other critics who see Hero’s actions in a slightly softer, more caring way:

In *Much Ado* [...] Shakespeare uses a woman to lead the male protagonist away from the individualistic aspiration, assertiveness, and narrow rationality that characterize the male role in Renaissance [...] so that the man may develop the emotional facility, the empathy, that will make it possible for him to relate to others in a genuinely caring way. (Hays 79).

Hays and other critics believe that Hero saves Claudio from himself, saves him from his aggression, his jealousy, his low self-esteem. They offer Hero all the credit for his newfound “emotional facility” and “empathy,” for the “genuinely caring way” he approaches his future marriage. Possibly the most important part of Hero’s acceptance of Claudio will be the fact that she simply takes him back. Hero never stops to complain or yell or attack. She never tries to turn the situation around, to make it his fault, to make the conversation about his sins: “no one has even thought to ask about Claudio’s sexual purity or lack of it” (Hays 87-88). As a general rule in fiction, no male character is a virgin –*if* the question comes up in the first place. The women will be expected to be pure and virtuous,⁷ and men will be held to a different standard. However, Hero never throws these facts in her husband’s face, never questions his virtue or his fidelity, never goes out of her way to make this his problem. In the end, Hero freely accepts

⁷ As has been noted before, “whether or not bridal virginity was an Elizabethan reality, it was nonetheless an absolute value,” (Boose 58). Boose also points out that Claudio’s rejection of Hero demonstrates a large part of the overwhelming evidence socially placed on a woman’s virtue.

Claudio's return and gladly joins with him in encouraging Beatrice and Benedick to wed – an encouragement and endorsement that indicates true felicity and joy in her own union.

Having considered the part Hero plays in the outcome, one must not overlook the role and effect of the male partner, Claudio. When Shakespeare established the Hero-Claudio relationship, he created the model for the men he would use in his later Suspected Infidelity plays: power and prowess, little internal and intrinsic confidence, and a certain amount of jealousy. At the start, the audience learns that Claudio has begun to develop an Othello-like reputation for glory on the fields of combat: "Much deserved on his part and equally remembered by Don Pedro: he hath borne himself beyond the promise of his age, doing, in the figure of a lamb, the feats of a lion: he hath indeed better bettered expectation than you must expect of me to tell you how" (1.1.12-17). For his feats in arms, Claudio has won the support of Don Pedro, which he will rely on later, from the wooing of Hero to the rejecting. This report also earns Claudio some respect from the audience and a position among the men at arms which becomes crucial to Claudio's self-conception and action plans. Claudio's military glories, though, have not filled him with self-confidence, leaving Claudio with the low inherent self-respect that also characterizes the later men. That Claudio does not value himself remains relevant: "it does not occur to him that he could successfully compete with Don Pedro," (Hays 85). Indeed, when he thinks Don Pedro has made a move on Hero, Claudio surrenders all hope:

'Tis certain so; the prince woos for himself.
 Friendship is constant in all other things
 Save in the office and affairs of love:
 Therefore, all hearts in love use their own tongues;
 Let every eye negotiate for itself
 And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch
 Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.
 This is an accident of hourly proof,
 Which I mistrusted not. (2.1.173-180)

Claudio readily believes that his close friend, his brother in arms, has betrayed his friendship. His belief that “Friendship is constant in all other things / Save in the office and affairs of love” and that “beauty is a witch/ Against whose charms faith melteth into blood” could speak to Claudio’s conviction that Hero’s charms are irresistible, even to Don Pedro; however, it more likely indicates that Claudio lacks a secure foundation of trust in his own interpersonal relationships, as well as any conviction that he could hold the eye of such a woman. Claudio, not unlike Othello, does not necessarily know how to comport himself outside the battlefield, and not unlike Posthumus, does not have the independent sense of his own standing to teach him who to be. He does not trust that he would be enough to merit or hold Hero’s interest or fidelity, let alone that he could push back another male, such as Don Pedro, if that male expressed an interest. One cannot deny that this dependency in the wooing and winning – not unlike Othello’s dependence on Cassio – undermines Claudio’s sense of security in the relationship. Lastly, one must consider the final note in Claudio’s personality – jealousy. While Othello maintained that he was not easily jealous, Claudio will not be alone in Shakespeare’s men in allowing his consciousness of his own deficiencies to make him vigilant to the possibility of losing everything he has. Indeed, Claudio’s susceptibility to these feelings becomes evident not only from the suspicion that Don Pedro might try to “fetch him in” (1.1.219) or steal Hero from him, but also when Beatrice points them out, calling Claudio “civil as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion” (2.1.288-289). In assembling Claudio, Shakespeare set the first mold for the men he would use to examine love tested by supposed infidelity.

In another hitch that will block the successful marriages of other Shakespearean couples, Claudio does not have a historical relationship with Hero – arguably, even less of a close relationship than Othello had with Desdemona – and he consequently does not know her deeply,

a problem that lends itself to a lack of trust or security. When Claudio speaks of his own relationship with Hero, he admits that he for a while has not been able to even give their relationship sufficient thought:

O, my lord,
When you went onward on this ended action,
I look'd upon her with a soldier's eye,
That liked, but had a rougher task in hand
Than to drive liking to the name of love:
But now I am return'd and that war-thoughts
Have left their places vacant, in their rooms
Come thronging soft and delicate desires,
All prompting me how fair young Hero is,
Saying, I liked her ere I went to wars. (1.1.291-300)

Now that he has returned, Claudio can embrace his romantic inclinations towards Hero.

However, these thoughts are not long standing acquaintance or a deep interpersonal knowledge.

Claudio here banks a great deal on the fact that he “liked her ere [he] went to wars,” especially since that thought comes somewhat retrospectively, and he apparently did not realize at the actual time that he had begun to feel affectionately for her. Most likely, they were in no contact since that last parting. One does not need to be a cynic to wonder if Claudio can therefore really be ready to offer a love that “never faileth” or even a true love at all, more than infatuation.

Indeed, most critics do not look on this moment with an unjaded eye. According to Walter King, Claudio, “a desirable catch himself, [...] is out shopping for a suitable wife” (146). However, before Claudio can marry, he must ensure that the girl he liked before he left would actually be a good partner. Were there any doubt that Claudio does not know her as well as Posthumus should know Imogen, the reconnaissance Claudio must employ should dispel that doubt. Claudio asks his friend, “Hath Leonato any son, my Lord” (1.1.288). As King puts it, Claudio shows himself “surprisingly unknowledgeable about Hero's family situation” (King 146). A close friend of the bride or her family, such as Don Pedro shows himself to be, would

already know the answer to such a question. One cannot overlook the potential influences of Claudio's lack of background relationship with Hero. Neely points out one interesting and painful consequence of the fact that Hero and Claudio do not have a long history, or really any history, together: "It is ironically appropriate that, though Hero has never talked to Claudio at all and he had 'never tempted her with word too large' [...], he should immediately accept Don John's report that she 'talk[ed] with a man out at a window' [...] as proof of her infidelity," (49). If they had had more time together, every occasion might not have seemed so personal and intimate to him. A real conversation – something Claudio implies that he and Hero have never shared – therefore looks like a form of unacceptable intimacy with another. One cannot deny the importance of prior history for cementing trust, especially since one sees its effects in action. Both Beatrice, who has been Hero's bedfellow, and Benedick, who has been a close friend of the family, immediately doubt Don John's accusations. Leonato, Hero's father, despite his horrific initial reaction at the wedding, eventually comes around, trusting his daughter on their past history: "My soul doth tell me Hero is belied" (5.1.54). His language, indeed, becomes reminiscent of Beatrice's words at the wedding, where she states that "on my soul, my cousin is belied!" (4.1.155). However, unlike Hero's friends, Claudio does not know Hero well; he does not know how to trust her. The fact that he does not know her does not set him up to be the most accepting of any errors of judgment and indiscretions she might experience or engage in.

Similarly unhelpful to a happy marriage, Claudio has evidently bought into conventional sexist wisdom. Many critics have noted this pervasive ideology and its potential effects.

Claudio, much like Posthumus, has come up in a culture that encourages him to believe that any woman he becomes involved with will eventually be unfaithful to him:

'What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness' (I.iii.41). It is conventional male wisdom that women are not to be trusted: 'O, my Lord, wisdom

and blood combating in so tender a body, we have ten proofs to one that blood hath the victory; (II.iii.154-156). Leonato says this for the benefit of the listening Benedick, but as his response to his daughter's defamation later shows, that is no indication that he does not accredit its truth. (Berger 19).

While Claudio did not hear Don John's pronouncement about betrothing oneself to unquietness, such ideas do not exist in a vacuum, and those values leak through one's surroundings. Even Leonato, the father of Claudio's future bride, has bought into this ideology and helped convey its message and value system to Claudio. Many would doubt the fairness of these values, but life has never been about fairness.⁸ When push comes to shove, when Claudio denounces Hero, the men, the other acceptors of this conventional wisdom, fall in line with him. Leonato calls Hero a "common stale" (4.1.68) when he follows his stated intention to "join with [Claudio] to disgrace her" (3.3.120). Don John assures Leonato that, "there is not chastity enough in language Without offence to utter" Hero's offenses (4.1.101-102), before he brushes off Hero's collapse as her falling under the weight of her sins (4.1.116-117). Leonato falls in line to such an extent that he wishes for her death (4.1.128-151). Leonato shares Claudio's concern over reputation, and they share a view on how to respond to threats to such – if a woman costs one face, distance oneself from her as much as one possibly can. At least Claudio has the decency not to arrange or wish for Hero's demise. With the exception of Benedick – who has come to desire the love of a

⁸Even the text does not ignore that hypocritical nature of the assaults the men are wont to wage. It is hard to consider men "more sinned against than sinning" in a text that includes the instruction "sigh no more ladies, sigh no more!/ Men were deceivers ever" (Berger 20). Although many characters talk a good game about understanding that men are at least as fickle as women, at least as likely to be inconstant in their affections, these men will simultaneously know and choose to ignore these facts. This doubletalk will allow them to shift responsibility away from themselves:

The difference between men and women in this respect – so goes the regnant ideology of the play – is that women are responsible for their sins but men are not. Male deception and inconstancy are gifts that God gives, and their proper name is Manhood. But woman [...] since by marrying she assumes the management not only of our husband's household but also of his reputation and honour, she is expected to conquer blood with wisdom even though the odds are ten to one against it. (Berger 20-21).

In spite of their conventional wisdom teaching them that women are not to be trusted, the men manage to make women responsible for all things, from the women's sins to the men's sins to the men's honor. Although such actions are hardly fair, the binds on the women do not vanish for that fact. These women continued to be constrained by the values of their men.

feisty woman – and the Friar – somewhat exempt from the usual male order – none of the males questions the conventional wisdom that women are not to be trusted. When it comes down to it, one cannot deny that by absorbing the misogynistic values of his culture, Claudio has been set up to believe that women will betray him and that such a betrayal will be unforgivable.

Having become convinced that his fiancée has betrayed him with another man, Claudio does what he believes he ought – he publicly disavows and abandons her. When Claudio conceives of the idea, no one he trusts stops him. The men who surround Claudio not only firmly support him, they help, when he first hears that she might be unfaithful, lend him the idea:

DON JOHN: The lady is disloyal.

CLAUDIO: Who, Hero?

DON PEDRO: Even she; Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero.

CLAUDIO: Disloyal?

DON JOHN: The word is too good to paint out her wickedness; I could say she were worse: think you of a worse title, and I will fit her to it. Wonder not till further warrant: go but with me to-night, you shall see her chamber-window entered, even the night before her wedding-day: if you love her then, to-morrow wed her; but it would better fit your honour to change your mind. (3.2.97-109)

When a male compatriot informs Claudio that his fiancée has been “disloyal,” Claudio experiences, at first, denial. He appears at first unable to process Don John’s accusations. Don John continues to drive the point home. As Linda Bamber emphasizes,

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John, informing Claudio of Hero's betrayal, calls her 'Leonato's Hero, your Hero, every man's Hero' [...]. Here the prior possession of the girl by her father is a kind of rhetorical advantage to her slanderer: because Don John can name two men who have 'had' Hero, the phrase 'every man's Hero' seems to confirm, not just to introduce, the idea of her duplicity. (115).

Because in their culture a woman will always be some man’s property, Don John does not have trouble listing the men to whom Hero has and will and might belong. Because the list sounds so long, it cannot help but sound bad. Claudio, though, still appears in shock, repeating Don John’s words instead of voicing his own opinion. Don John also emphasizes another clause of the

masculine code of honor, one that will prove vital to the play, when he tells Claudio, “if you love her then, to-morrow wed her; but it would better fit your honour to change your mind.” Don John does not deny the possibility that true love should be enough to prevent Claudio from disgracing Hero; however, he insists that masculine honor requires he leave her, that masculine honor must always be more important than love. Claudio, though, does not yet seem to understand what Don John has been saying. Not until a few lines later, when the full effect of the accusation has sunk in, does Claudio make a decision about what he ought to do with Don John’s supposed revelation. Though they have not moved to the proving stage, Claudio already has his plan for what to do if the information proves true, and his closest male advisor, Don Pedro, agrees with the plan:

CLAUDIO: If I see any thing to-night why I should not marry her to-morrow in
the congregation, where I should wed, there will I shame her.

DON PEDRO: And, as I wooed for thee to obtain her, I will join with thee to
disgrace her. (3.2 116-120)

Although Claudio has not already condemned Hero in his mind, he certainly falls quickly in line with what to do when he does condemn her – “in the congregation, where [he] should wed, there will [he] shame her.” Support comes not only from Don John, bringer of the supposed revelation, but also their leader, Don Pedro, who “wooed for [Claudio] to obtain her,” and who will now “join with [him] to disgrace her.” Of course, one cannot condemn Claudio exclusively, as he did not arrive at this mistaken view of Hero’s fidelity by himself – he and Don Pedro were led there by Don John. Thereupon, Claudio’s anger and sense of being used open him up to a desire and willingness to disgrace her in public.

Neither Claudio nor Don Pedro has the capacity or willingness to forgive Hero for her supposed offences. Admittedly, Don Pedro’s willingness to forgive Hero for her actions or any affairs will not be paramount. However, had Don Pedro been more forgiving, he could have

inspired Claudio to greater heights of love and charity.⁹ As the situation unfolds, Claudio overlooks so many possible and more charitable responses,¹⁰ such as simply addressing the issue in private, actually talking to her and seeing what truth there might be to these accusations, or possibly forgiving her for the affair. By enacting the rejection proposed by Don John over a more loving reaction, Don Pedro gives Claudio's actions a level of social support. Of course, one cannot deny that Claudio executes a brutal rejection:

CLAUDIO: Give not this rotten orange to your friend;
 She's but the sign and semblance of her honour.
 Behold how like a maid she blushes here!
 O, what authority and show of truth
 Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
 Comes not that blood as modest evidence
 To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear,
 All you that see her, that she were a maid,
 By these exterior shows? But she is none:
 She knows the heat of a luxurious bed;
 Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty.

LEONATO: What do you mean, my lord?

CLAUDIO: Not to be married,
 Not to knit my soul to an approved wanton.

LEONATO: Dear my lord, if you, in your own proof,
 Have vanquish'd the resistance of her youth,
 And made defeat of her virginity,--

CLAUDIO: I know what you would say: if I have known her,
 You will say she did embrace me as a husband,
 And so extenuate the 'forehand sin:
 No, Leonato,
 I never tempted her with word too large;
 But, as a brother to his sister, show'd
 Bashful sincerity and comely love.

HERO: And seem'd I ever otherwise to you?

CLAUDIO: Out on thee! Seeming! I will write against it:
 You seem to me as Dian in her orb,

⁹ "Claudio's determination to expose Hero in church is quite in line with the social usage of his society, which accepted as legitimate harsh reprisal for sexual fraud, but he also exposes his general moral blindness. And the immediate compliance of Don Pedro [...] indicates that Claudio's decision, however lacking in Christian charity, should not be reckoned a complete social abnormality," (King 150).

¹⁰ Shakespeare's source material certainly addressed the other options: "The interrupted ceremony of *Much Ado About Nothing* [...] derive from important plot incidents in the sources: Bandello's novella 22 [...]. Claudio's violent disruption of the wedding ceremony itself is missing in Bandello, where Timbreo merely sends a friend to Fenicia's house before the wedding to announce the breaking-off of the match" (Neely 25).

As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;
 But you are more intemperate in your blood
 Than Venus, or those pamper'd animals
 That rage in savage sensuality. (4.1.32-62).

Claudio rejects Hero entirely and shames her before her family and friends and, most likely, everyone else she knows. In this conversation, one gets a full spread of the wide variety of reasons that Claudio cannot cope with the possibility that his partner has been unfaithful.

Claudio knows that marriages must last forever, so marrying Hero under these circumstances would be “knit[ting his] soul to an approved wanton.” Apparently, he does not believe he could do that. Furthermore, Claudio considers that he “never tempted her with word too large” and “show’d/ Bashful sincerity and comely love.” Claudio thinks that he has comported himself exactly as he ought, has never tried to step beyond an absolutely proper courtship, and he thought that she had done the same. Therefore, any affairs she has had represent for Claudio a betrayal of their relationship and their agreement on how their relationship should proceed. He also believes that she lacks “honour,” “virtue,” and “modesty,” that she has dissembled everything from her seeming integrity to possibly her feelings for him. He rejects her utterly.

One can see that Claudio did not possess a love that “is kind,” that “vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, / Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.” Claudio, whose perceptions of reality and behavior have been clouded by patriarchal and heteronormative social constructions and mores, does not yet understand how to love Hero properly. Many critics believe that his actions and his anger prove him beyond forgiveness or redemption: “Shakespeare wants us, for the moment, to dislike Claudio intensely” (Hunter 63). While statements about authorial intent are always difficult, one cannot deny that

the audience must be uncomfortable with the level of anger.¹¹ Many critics believe that Claudio's anger has passed all reasonable bounds and evidences the destruction of their love: "Claudio's tirades against Hero [...] spring entirely from a love-destroying hatred and they are a direct attack upon the very heart of the comic mystery -- romantic love. They are an expression of the hatred that love contains, and the terms which Claudio uses betray a revulsion against sexuality itself" (Hunter 63). Hunter does not believe that Claudio's reaction, his cruel rejection, stems from the hurt of being betrayed by a woman that he cared for and trusted. He overlooks the emotional pain that Claudio must be feeling, because Claudio does believe, albeit wrongly, that his fiancée slept with someone else the night before they were supposed to wed. Unfortunately, Hunter does not find himself alone in the view: "Claudio's self-righteousness exposes a serious flaw in the social code: the superficiality of a value system that mistakes sexual purity for love is shown up in all its heartless folly" (King 150). King apparently believes that Claudio not only has trouble valuing Hero as a potential spouse when believing her to be impure and unfaithful but also only loved or valued her because he thought she had been a virgin. These critics, though, overlook the fact that Claudio "liked her ere [he] went to wars" (1.1.300) and thought her "the sweetest lady that ere [he] looked upon" (1.1.183-184). Furthermore, these critics are overlooking the fact that this anger would be utterly disproportionate to the situation had he been entirely indifferent to her. Had his interest in the situation only been his name, that he could have secured simply by severing the engagement. His desire to confront her in person indicates a personal involvement and pain at the betrayal. Claudio's ire continues throughout another pained monologue, this time forswearing all love:

¹¹ These remarks are not to say that anger over infidelity, even to this extent, would solely be the province of an older time. Even in contemporary America, with loser values and restrictions placed on female sexuality, if a man appeared at a wedding and informed the crowd that the bride had slept with a different man the night before the wedding, the ceremony would doubtless have at least a three minute pause for consideration.

O Hero, what a Hero hadst thou been,
 If half thy outward graces had been placed
 About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart!
 But fare thee well, most foul, most fair! farewell,
 Thou pure impiety and impious purity!
 For thee I'll lock up all the gates of love,
 And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang,
 To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm,
 And never shall it more be gracious. (4.1.105-113)

Claudio evidently placed a great deal of faith in Hero. He thought her exceptional. Since she does not prove so, since he believes that she has been unfaithful, has shown herself capable of infidelity, then their entire relationship has been a *lie*. Evidently, because Hero has proved false, Claudio will not only never trust her again, he will never trust any female again, “lock up all the gates of love.” Once the epitome, for him, of all the beauties and virtues of the female, Hero now stands for all the corruption of the female, and thus all females are corrupted. She has confirmed, he thinks, everything his misogynistic culture said about women and their proneness to infidelity. The resulting blame, pain, and shame will be placed on the offending female, on Hero.¹² The misogynist thinking of this culture, which Claudio has internalized, makes Hero appear more likely to have affairs and makes Claudio more likely to suspect that she has had.

When faced with Claudio’s repudiation of his bride, the Friar proposes faking Hero’s death, clearly hoping to inspire in Claudio a Posthumus-like spirit of atonement¹³; unfortunately,

¹² Notably, although Claudio and Don Pedro claim to have spoken with Hero’s lover, the man never gets called before the audience or the people of Messina. Hero’s supposed lover will not be publicly shamed for his complicity in the adultery. That pain comes only to Hero.

¹³ Your daughter here the princes left for dead:
 Let her awhile be secretly kept in,
 And publish it that she is dead indeed; [...]
 Marry, this well carried shall on her behalf
 Change slander to remorse; that is some good[...].
 She dying, as it must so be maintain'd,
 Upon the instant that she was accused,
 Shall be lamented, pitied and excused
 Of every hearer: for it so falls out
 That what we have we prize not to the worth
 Whiles we enjoy it, but being lack'd and lost,
 Why, then we rack the value, then we find

this plan does not work. Although Claudio admits to being sad that Hero has died, he does not find himself immediately swamped with guilt at her demise, but rather appears to direct his focus to furthering the scheme to have Benedick much in love with Beatrice.¹⁴ Though the play requires one to accept Hero and Claudio's returned relationship, most of the play's critics have not found it easy to forgive Claudio for this callous-seeming reaction: "Hero initially 'died upon his [Claudio's] words' (IV.i. 223) and [...] Claudio makes no attempt to repair her shattered emotions at the end of the scene, simply going off and leaving her for dead" (Cerasano 40). Carol Thomas Neely, as well, remains unimpressed with Claudio's development: "In the tragedies women actually die. But the woman's pretended or real death, even when combined with the vigorous defense of her virtues by her friends [...] does not by itself ensure penitence. [...] Claudio seems utterly unaffected by the death until Borachio testifies to Hero's innocence [...] then reidealization is instantaneous" (52). Neely recognizes that Claudio does not achieve forgiveness of Hero or acceptance of her supposed mistakes so much as acceptance of

The virtue that possession would not show us
 Whiles it was ours. So will it fare with Claudio:
 When he shall hear she died upon his words,
 The idea of her life shall sweetly creep
 Into his study of imagination,
 And every lovely organ of her life
 Shall come apparell'd in more precious habit,
 More moving-delicate and full of life,
 Into the eye and prospect of his soul,
 Than when she lived indeed; then shall he mourn,
 If ever love had interest in his liver,
 And wish he had not so accused her,
 No, though he thought his accusation true.
 Let this be so, and doubt not but success
 Will fashion the event in better shape
 Than I can lay it down in likelihood. (4.1.213-215,221-221,224-248).

¹⁴ For example, in 5.1, when Benedick comes to issue the challenge to Claudio, Claudio does not speak to Benedick or Don Pedro of grief over Hero's death, with the exception of admitting that he and Don Pedro are "high-proof melancholy and would fain have it beaten away," though such a line could be taken as displeasure at the destruction of his nuptials by infidelity. Then Claudio and Don Pedro continue with jests to Benedick about Beatrice and her supposed feelings for Benedick.

A player could choose to believe that Claudio uses this interest in Benedick and Beatrice's relationship to mask his own complicated feelings about Hero, his love for her, her supposed betrayal, and now her supposed death, but such a performance would be an interpretation of subtext, not text.

his own actual mistakes. These readers recognize that Claudio is not earning his happy ending at this moment. He is just not screwing up that badly. The Friar's plan should enable him to commence earning his happy ending:

Claudio has vowed [...] to defend himself against love, to guard his eyes with 'conjecture' (a word whose root suggests an aggressive hurling motion) against the entrance of beauty so that it will never more 'be gracious.' The priest proposes a reversal of this process, a release of graciousness, or Grace, whereby 'the idea of her life shall sweetly creep / Into his study of imagination.' (Hays 88).

If the Friar's plan had worked, Hero would once again be gracious in Claudio's eyes. Claudio would once again recognize the grace inherent in her, the goodness, the capacity for love. This plan, used to such success, inadvertently, in *Cymbeline*, had every chance of working in *Much Ado*.¹⁵ Claudio, though, does not follow the Friar's plan that he learn something from this experience or that Claudio come to love Hero despite failings and weaknesses.¹⁶ Claudio does not realize that he has done wrong until Borachio informs him that he disgraced Hero without cause and therefore she died innocent. That counts as admitting that he made a mistake but not as learning to value her despite her failings. Hunter points out that Claudio's eventual contrition does not stem from the cause intended by the Friar:

Claudio experiences contrition, confesses his sin, and agrees to make satisfaction. His contrition is the result not, as the friar had hoped, of the news of Hero's death, but of the confession of Don John's accomplice, Borachio, who makes it clear that Claudio's hatred and cruelty have been the product of a terrible illusion. [...] Leonato asks them to make their confession public [...] Further 'satisfaction' will be Claudio's alone. [...] In the comedy of forgiveness, however, contrition and confession are usually enough. (Hunter 65).

¹⁵ Some audiences do not trust it. King considers the Friar's plan to be "based upon the psychological fact that superficial people have only a limited capacity for change" (151). Although many readers would characterize King's view of Claudio as unfair or overly judgmental, such a view must skew the sense of the play. If one does have an already low opinion of Claudio, one will not be surprised that he does not change, does not come to a higher realization about the good of Hero and the benefits of trust and forgiveness.

¹⁶ One cannot deny that, in the face of that sort of slander, there would be nothing Hero or her kin could do to clear her name. No one could have anticipated Hero's supposed lover stepping forth and declaring that it had all been a set-up.

Claudio does not take the belief in Hero's death as a chance to re-examine his life and his choices, let alone his values, and does not learn the lesson that one might expect him to learn. For example, Claudio has not begun to mourn Hero's supposed demise, nor taken any responsibility for his part in it. He also continues to focus on Don Pedro's scheme to get Beatrice and Benedick together. Doubtless, though, many audience members and critics will simply respond, take what you can get. Claudio does, eventually, admit he had been wrong. As Hunter notes, since Claudio appears in a "comedy of forgiveness," "contrition and confession" should suffice, which means he does get off comparatively easy. As Janice Hays puts it, "the play's resolution does not come any more according to the priest's than to Don John's scheming, for it appears that once Hero has 'died,' Claudio does not give her another thought. Yet ultimately the priest's faith is correct" (93). In the end, Claudio and Hero are reunited to be married. He has not done an exceptional job at being in this relationship or repairing it; but one gets the sense that his work has been close enough for government work. Unfortunately, first, the audience sees Claudio's insufficiency, his failure as a partner, his failure to mourn his partner, no matter her flaws.

When Claudio finally realizes that that he has made a horrible mistake and believes he caused Hero's death, he promises to mourn her deeply – for *one* night – and marry her cousin in her stead – a degree of atonement some might characterize as getting off easy. Claudio's first achievement comes at recognizing that his fiancée did not betray him and experiencing remorse:

DON PEDRO: Runs not this speech like iron through your blood?

CLAUDIO: I have drunk poison while he utter'd it. (5.1.225-226).

As Claudio hears how he wronged Hero, he actually feels like the words are killing him, calling them poison. Moreover, Claudio finally begins to remember her as she had previously appeared to him: "Sweet Hero! now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first"

(5.1.262-263). He sees her once again as his beloved fiancée.¹⁷ Oddly, Claudio does not remember Hero's personality or something she told him. He remembers her "image" and her "rare semblance." He remembers her seeming, her appearance. The audience can once again remember that Claudio and Hero had not been close or emotionally intimate prior to their marriage. So, one of the issues that plagued their first wedding has not yet been entirely assuaged. One must also note that Claudio does not design his own atonement for the offense. Instead, he follows the method prescribed by Leonato, Hero's father:

CLAUDIO: Choose your revenge yourself;
 Impose me to what penance your invention
 Can lay upon my sin: yet sinn'd I not
 But in mistaking. [...]
 LEONATO: I cannot bid you bid my daughter live;
 That were impossible: but, I pray you both,
 Possess the people in Messina here
 How innocent she died; and if your love
 Can labour ought in sad invention,
 Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb
 And sing it to her bones, sing it to-night:
 To-morrow morning come you to my house,
 And since you could not be my son-in-law,
 Be yet my nephew: my brother hath a daughter,
 Almost the copy of my child that's dead,
 And she alone is heir to both of us:
 Give her the right you should have given her cousin,
 And so dies my revenge.
 CLAUDIO: O noble sir,
 Your over-kindness doth wring tears from me!
 I do embrace your offer; and dispose
 For henceforth of poor Claudio. (5.1.284-309)

Claudio apologizes for his crimes, while simultaneously pulling what some readers would characterize as a cop-out, by admitting his "sin" while referring to his actions as "mistaking." That characterization of his actions ignores the fact that much of his offense lay not in mistaking Margaret for Hero but in publicly shaming Hero and in denouncing her without allowing her a

¹⁷ For some readers and audience members, this moment will doubtless be reminiscent of Othello's memories of Desdemona that resurface in the moments right before and soon after of her death, coming to see her once again as his young bride, not the woman he thought had betrayed him.

chance to defend herself from his accusations. Claudio's crime came in his failure to love with a love that "never faileth." When the test came, Claudio's faith broke. Love has to bend, not break, under pressure, or the marriage cannot survive. However, at least, Claudio instructs Leonato to "impose [him] to what penance [Leonato's] invention/ Can lay upon [Claudio's] sin." He might reduce the nature of his offense, but he does not plead to reduce to severity of his punishment. Furthermore, when Leonato bids Claudio to mourn Hero publicly, to "possess the people in Messina here/ How innocent she died," and "hang her an epitaph upon her tomb/ And sing it to her bones," before coming the next day to be married to Hero's supposed cousin, Claudio recognizes that he has gotten off easy for his offenses: "Your over-kindness doth wring tears from me! / I do embrace your offer." Claudio's willingness to accept a new bride that has been selected him by another man demonstrates one of Claudio's new levels of growth: "Claudio's final test comes when he must accept and wed Leonato's fictitious niece sight unseen. Emblematically, his willingness to do so represents a working out of his deep distrust both of himself and of others" (Hays 93). He has not learned to accept people's flaws, but Claudio finally has learned something through this whole ordeal, and he has made a start of getting over the trust issues that plagued him in the play's beginning and set up his mistrust of Hero. Though one cannot say for sure that Claudio has been completely redeemed on that front, progress has been made.

Although Claudio has some shields, one cannot deny that he had a number of sins to expiate before he can be reunited with his former bride: "despite the excuses with which he is provided, a residue of guilt remains with Claudio, and he must expiate it. Through his hatred and cruelty, he has enabled evil to enter the world of comedy. To deserve our forgiveness, he must be put through a process of penance" (Hunter 64-65). Hunter agrees that in order to earn a

comic ending, complete with a joyous wedding, he must first atone for his part in what happened during the first one.¹⁸ By mourning publicly and demonstrating his sorrow and repentance, Claudio can, as Hays describes it, “go through a ritual of atonement that amounts to an act of contrition, penitence, and penance, necessary steps to obtain the forgiveness that makes possible God’s extension of Grace” (Hays 93). Having admitted both to himself and others that he was mistaken and accused Hero wrongly, as well as taking responsibility for her death, Claudio must engage in an act of public mourning, to restore Hero’s reputation in the eyes of the rest of Messina:

Done to death by slanderous tongues
Was the Hero that here lies:
Death, in guerdon of her wrongs,
Gives her fame which never dies.
So the life that died with shame
Lives in death with glorious fame. [...]
Now, unto thy bones good night!
Yearly will I do this rite. (5.3. 3-8, 23-24)

In this “sad invention” of Claudio’s, the reader can find several key elements of Claudio’s atonement. First, he admits that Hero died of slander, not her shames, as had been suggested when she fainted at the funeral. Second, it promises her eternal fame, the prize apparently for decent women who suffer unjustly at the hands of their men.¹⁹ Third, and most important, he

¹⁸ Some critics and doubtless some viewers find this degree of atonement somewhat lacking and too ritualized to be of real value, especially compared to the penance paid by some other Shakespeare characters. Walter King, for example, states, “Claudio’s penance, which strikes modern reader as silly in the extreme, I take to be further illustration of his and his society’s superficiality. Readers who are amused by it are, I think, reacting as Shakespeare hoped they would – comically” (153). However, King’s interpretation ignores that Claudio did not design his own penance, nor did he set the timeline of his mourning. Those came from Leonato, so one may assume Leonato and Hero’s appetite for revenge or punishment has been satiated. As for what King and others might say of the “superficiality” of Messinian society, when one considers the period standards for atoning for such slanders, the prescribed plan actually does not seem out of line: “Throughout the Middle Ages, slander was construed by the Church courts as the telling of lies. It was treated as a spiritual offense and the guilty party was sentenced to do penance, which could take a variety of forms including ‘humiliating [public] apology’” (Cerasano 32). Thus, one could argue that Leonato’s punishment would have been the expected method of punishment.

¹⁹ Leontes, who believes his wife dead, keeps his wife’s memory alive and well through almost two decades of public mourning, assisted by Paulina. Othello knows that Desdemona’s murder will be spoken of again in Venice, and one certainly gets the sense that the memory will not fade from the collective consciousness soon.

promises to return each year to “do this rite.” As Hays points out, Claudio’s vow suggests “a long term commitment to think of Hero as she really was, not as Claudio has projectively imagined her to be” (93). He will dedicate himself to always remembering her true self and to preserving that memory in his own mind and in that of Messina, where he had so shamed her. His determination to perform it yearly demonstrates a deep degree of repentance, as well as a conviction that he will not simply get over Hero’s death or entirely forgive himself for his role in it, even after he has taken a new wife. When Claudio realizes what he has done to Hero, he does deeply regret his actions and makes atonement for his actions, minimal though that atonement might otherwise appear; by mourning her publicly and acting to restore Hero’s reputation, Claudio contributes at least in a small way to the restoration of their union, which will allow the couple to move towards a happy ending.

One must not forget, of course, when thinking of Claudio’s mistakes and his redemption, that his actions and reactions do not exist in a vacuum – Claudio gets a happier ending, but he also does not err as badly some of the other Shakespearean husbands. Shakespeare does not present Claudio as an inherently corrupt man, despite a slightly jealous nature:

Shakespeare presented them with the spectacle of a man falling victim to false appearance and, as a result, becoming possessed by the force of hatred, in other words, with the spectacle of a man behaving like a man. In fact, Claudio's crime is being human. There is no worse offense, but surely an audience of human beings should not indulge itself in a complacent sense of superiority to such an offender. (Hunter 66).

When one considers that Claudio does not act violently against his fiancée but merely passes judgment too soon, trusts the wrong people, and casts her aside without proper cause, one cannot deny that Claudio never actually passes beyond the ordinary levels of human failure. Claudio shows himself to be merely human, “a man behaving like a man,” not a monster. Hunter’s point remains valid, that “Claudio’s crime is being human” and though “there is no worse offense [...]

an audience of human beings should” forgive him that. Indeed, Shakespeare’s does not create Claudio as an entirely awful person or an inhuman wretch, just a weak and fallible being:

"Shakespeare wants to show us in Claudio a man in love whose love has not been able to survive the severe strain to which it has been subjected" (Hunter 62). Claudio’s love does not stand up to the true test of his affections, but Shakespeare shows the audience in many ways that his actions could, indeed, have been much, much worse. Claudio does not, as other Shakespearean husbands do, attempt to arrange for his female partner’s demise. Claudio never asks Benedick – his sworn brother – or Don Pedro – who sued for him – to avenge his honor. Actually, such a plan never enters into his discourse. His only intent, when told that she had been disloyal, was to break with her. Such a reaction shows itself reasonable, especially by modern standards, especially when held up against other erring Shakespearean husbands.

One must also not forget that, not unlike Othello and Posthumus, Claudio got manipulated. Indeed, unlike the trifles held against other of Shakespeare’s women,²⁰ Don John shows Claudio and Don Pedro very damning evidence. Not only do they witness a man talking with a woman they take to be Hero, according to Don Pedro, that man gave witness to the affair:

upon mine honour,
Myself, my brother and this grieved count
Did see her, hear her, at that hour last night
Talk with a ruffian at her chamber-window
Who hath indeed, most like a liberal villain,
Confess'd the vile encounters they have had
A thousand times in secret. (4.1.93-99).

Evidently, Claudio’s true mistake was not just mistaking Margaret for Hero or even mistaking Hero’s nature – especially since one other trusted male made the mistake and another male pretended to firmly believe it– but rather in trusting another man, believing the word of this man

²⁰ Othello accepts a handkerchief and an overheard conversation as proof of infidelity. Posthumus takes the word of an acquaintance who claims to have slept with Imogen, as well as holding the possession of a certain bracelet to be proof of carnal knowledge. Leontes actually creates all of the jealousy in his own mind.

he only just met, this “ruffian,” over that of his fiancée.²¹ However, whether or not Claudio should have trusted such a man, it would be hard to maintain a belief in Hero’s fidelity after this man “confessed the vile encounters they have had / A thousand times in secret.” One cannot deny that such would be rather damning evidence. Furthermore, Shakespeare builds in barriers to protect Claudio from being the only man at fault:

Shakespeare must now set about cajoling us into forgiving Claudio his trespasses. The two methods he uses to do so are excuse and penance. By personifying the origin of evil in Don John, Shakespeare has provided a scapegoat upon whom to heap Claudio's misdeeds at the end of the play. By allowing Don Pedro to share Claudio's errors, Shakespeare lightens them. He has taken unusual care in *Much Ado* to provide his *humanum genus* with a strong defense against the enmity of the audience. In the rest of his comedies of forgiveness, he is by no means so tender toward his erring heroes. (Hunter 64-65).

Hunter raises several important points. Firstly, he draws attention to the fact that Shakespeare has erected several barriers, especially in the forms of Don John and Don Pedro, between Claudio and being entirely at fault. Hunter correctly asserts that Shakespeare will rarely be as kind to his other erring spouses.²² Although Claudio certainly makes mistakes and behaves very badly in shaming Hero publicly, Claudio’s actions are mitigated slightly in the fact that he did operate on an exceptionally high level of evidence – at least in comparison to other Shakespearean men – and that his actions involved a considerably lower level of violence and aggression towards her – especially in comparison to other Shakespearean men.

Despite how horrible any of Claudio’s actions might appear, a reader or audience member should not forget to grade on a curve against the actions of the other male characters.

²¹ The text does not make clear when this so-called confession occurred. One could argue that Don Pedro bases his comments on the conversation overheard between Margaret and Borachio. However, Don Pedro’s use of the word “confess’d,” as well as “vile encounters,” seems to imply that Don Pedro got his information straight from the horse’s mouth. Indeed, since Don Pedro does not claim to have heard Hero admit to these encounters, it seems prudent to assume that “Hero” had not been present when the “confession” came to light.

²² One could argue that by including such figures as Iago, Iachimo, and Cloten, Shakespeare *does* encourage viewers not necessarily to view the erring spouses as blameless but rather to grade them on a curve. However, that curve does not equate to absolution.

Claudio's repudiation, no matter how horrible, that Claudio exists at the beginning of a continuum of men making the same mistake. Although Claudio rages and storms against Hero and publicly shames her, he does not go so far as to arrange for her murder or to actually kill her himself. His violence and aggression are strongly contained. This containment prevents him from too thoroughly destroying his own future happiness and leaves the window open for their relationship to be restored. He does not set up a situation that cannot be repaired, does not create a problem that he will be unable to fix through atonement and apology, and by – one could argue – handing the problem off to his female partner to save him. Luckily, Hero, unlike her cousin, would actually be inclined to save Claudio from himself, to allow him to redeem himself for his mistakes and to forgive him when he comes back. Of course, she does not demonstrate the intense willingness and desire to save her partner seen in later Shakespearean heroines, such as Desdemona. After all, one never sees Hero attempt to make contact with Claudio after the wedding to work out their issues; she relies wholly on the fake-her-death-until-he-comes-around plan. At least Desdemona keeps reaching out to Othello, no matter how bad the situation becomes. Still, Hero does enough to keep them on the track for their happy ending, accepting him and their marriage once he has shown himself to be worthy of forgiveness. *Much Ado* places a certain amount of importance on her willingness to take him back, on the forgiveness built into her romantic love: "romantic love itself turns out in these plays to be dependent upon the virtue of charity. The love of man for woman (but not of woman for man) is seen as too frail an emotion to sustain the pressures that are frequently put upon it. Man's love fails, and woman must charitably forgive the failure" (Hunter 60). Hero fulfills her rather womanly role of redeeming and saving her erring male partner. When Claudio's love does not keep him from attacking and damaging their relationship, she does not attack him or herself, and when he atones

and returns, she accepts him back, ready once again to cement and secure their relationship. Her love for him never seems shaken by his failings. As Hunter points out, "An on-stage happy ending in these plays is dangerously easy to attain. The forgiveness of the offenders by the offended is all that is needed" (64). Hero succeeds in saving Claudio and their happy ending by forgiving him for her offenses against her. In the end, the couple does succeed in contributing to their happy ending.

As Hunter correctly points out, "happy endings" appear "dangerously easy to attain" in *Much Ado*. It all does seem to work out a little too easily: Boracchio and Don John get caught by the dumbest people in Messina, because Boracchio couldn't resist the urge to brag of their misdeeds; Leonato lets Claudio off the hook after only one night of mourning, without exacting any painful retribution, which the audience knows Beatrice would never have done had the revenge been of her choosing; the audience never sees Hero even once considering not taking Claudio back or believing that he really needs to work for it. Instead, things come together and the young lovers readily do their small parts. Hunter rightly calls it dangerous, because Claudio never needs to learn the most important lesson: how to live with his future partner as a fallible human being. The resolution lacks a sense that the lessons have been learned, the wrongs have been punished, and the errors will never again be repeated. The audience instead gets left to take it on faith that Claudio has become capable of policing his own jealousy and that Hero will continue able to save Claudio from himself. Indeed, the ease with which the couple are allowed to come back together has led some critics, such as Carol Thomas Neely, to question whether or not any true lesson has been learned, whether the couple has been at all improved by this ordeal:

Claudio's and Hero's pat reaffirmation of their wedding vows ignores rather than transforming the conflicts which erupted through the broken nuptials: First Claudio performs a ritualistic but impersonal penance[...]. Then he asserts his faith in women by agreeing to accept a substitute bride. But his willingness to

'seize upon' any bride seems to suggest that the possessiveness and conventionality which fuel romance are not exorcised. [...] Claudio and Hero give no sign of establishing a new relationship or of incorporating desire. They move mechanically back into their former roles. (55).

Neely makes a fair point when she refers to Claudio's penance as ritualistic, though one could argue some with her characterization of the epitaph as "impersonal." He did have to write it. However, she does point out that their language does not show them "incorporating desire." They hardly even seem to have achieved higher levels of emotional intimacy. They instead focus mostly on the issue that haunted their first attempt at a wedding – her virginity and his inability to accept her. To Neely, this re-discussion does not show them "establishing a new relationship" but instead simply reinstating their old relationship. However, Neely overlooks the fact that Claudio did mourn and admit that his actions had been wrong. Furthermore, Claudio's willingness to marry someone Hero's family selected indicates a new willingness to trust, to have true faith in a woman. Still, Neely's concerns about the scene are valid. The audience simply has to trust that Claudio has learned something from his ordeal, and they are left trying to take his actions in the best light possible, since the period of learning and atonement remained so brief.

These readers are justifiably irked by the feeling that these characters got saved. There surrounds the characters an aura of genre armor, a sense that they are being protected from either the full ramifications of their actions or having to make a real commitment to certain ideas by a determination, likely on the part of Shakespeare, that this play will be a *comedy* and it will have a *happy ending*. One strongly senses the play driving to a comedic ending, and so the characters are compelled to follow a comedic script:

In Shakespearean comedy, if wooing is to lead to a wedding ceremony and consummation of the marriage, separation from family and friends must occur, misogyny must be exorcised, romantic, idealizing affection must be experienced and qualified, and sexual desire must be acknowledged and controlled. Only then

can romance and desire be reconciled in a formal social ceremony. [...] Women often bear a double burden. Once released from their own fears, usually through the actions of other women, they must dispel men's resistance and transform men's emotions. (Neely 28).

Neely points out the number of things that must occur for a comedy to reach completion, from the exorcising of misogyny to the acknowledgment of sexuality, each of which occurs in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Once those things are dealt with, the couple does manage a successful “formal social ceremony” in the form of their second and this time actually successful wedding. She also acknowledges the stress placed on the females in these comedies, as Hero does bear the brunt in this comedy, as her role requires her to forgive Claudio his trespasses, whereas Claudio’s primary role appears to be not to trespass too badly. Despite these burdens, the characters remain almost impervious, and there remains no moment when one truly fears it will not all come right in the end:

The possibility of betrayal in this world is very slight. The women will not betray the men, the comic world will not betray its chosen people, the playwright will not betray our expectations of a happy ending [...] We are titillated with reminders that women might be unfaithful; the cuckoldry jokes [...] remind us of what could happen. But it never does. The women are as transparently faithful as the plot is transparently comic. We are always on our way to the happy ending, to marriage, to the love of a good woman. [...] The anxiety [about sexual betrayal] is there in the culture[...]; but it need not affect our relations with[...] the woman in question, who is without exception chaste, faithful, good. (Bamber 21, 111).

No one watching *Much Ado* truly fears for a second that Hero would ever be unfaithful to Claudio. Before the accusations are made, the audience sees the apparent villain plotting to destroy the couple and knows exactly how the trick will be carried out before it occurs. Hero remains always good and pure whenever shown, “as transparently faithful as the plot is transparently comic.” Were there any concerns about the happy union after Claudio breaks off the wedding during the ceremony, they are rapidly assuaged by the Friar who instantly develops a plan for securing the happy ending. As Bamber emphasizes, the audience always feels on track

“to the happy ending, to marriage, to the love of a good woman.” Unlike *Othello* or *Cymbeline*, the audience does not struggle with the fear that things will not work out alright in the end. The play drives so strongly towards comedy that one always feels the characters are safe from too much danger.

When it comes to the issue of genre armor, of character shielding, one cannot neglect that it did not happen accidentally. Robert Grams Hunter said it best: "Shakespeare could have done the whole thing differently if he had wanted to" (62). Hero and Claudio represent a prototype of the Shakespearean Suspected Infidelity model. Therefore, one must ask what Shakespeare thought of this couple, especially when creating the sense that they were *being saved* instead of *saving themselves*. A viewer gets the sense that their ending could be more satisfying had they been more actively involved in creating their own happy ending, the way later Shakespearean Suspected Infidelity couples are. In the end, the moral appears to be that being saved, which requires counting on providence, God, or a so-inclined writer, may work but it possibly will not, and unless one knows oneself to be part of a comedy, could be risky. Much more importantly, then, in controlling outcomes must be taking an active role in both avoiding mistakes and, when they inevitably occur, both atoning for one's errors and accepting the failures of others.

“Half the Wooer”: Love, Violence, and Genre in *Othello*

Although the characters never refer to *Othello*'s genre, Othello and Desdemona, as a couple, still appear quite invested in remaining in a romantic comedy. Unfortunately, the characters cannot singlehandedly will themselves into a happy ending, finding themselves instead in a particularly grim tragedy. The question thus becomes how the lovers – and the audience – end up there. When Othello perpetrates egregious acts of violence against his wife, he demonstrably gears the play towards a fully tragic outcome. Yet Shakespeare endows his wife, Desdemona, with a tremendous power of love, especially for her husband. This love provides the audience with a hope that she will be able to save him and that she will be able to ensure their happy ending. Unfortunately, in the struggle between love and war that creates the plot and genre-determining tensions, Desdemona's power of love proves insufficient to save the characters or the play from a tragic ending, and violence wins the war. The subject of this chapter will be to direct attention to the way masculine violence and even more importantly female love compete to control the genre and allow the play to tilt into a full-scale tragedy.

Many critics disagree on the role love plays in *Othello* and whether Shakespeare represents the quality as a productive or destructive one. Ellen Terry, who performed Desdemona in 1881, found her to be made of love and found it one of her best qualities: “Her purity of heart and her charity (charity “thinketh no evil”) are sufficient explanation of her being slow to grasp the situation. It is not until she has been grossly insulted and brutally assaulted that she understands. Her behavior from that dreadful moment should surely convince us that she is not a simpleton, but a saint” (62). Even Harold Bloom, who wrote 110 years after Ellen Terry performed, finds Desdemona's actions are only explicable through the view that Desdemona is a creature of love and forgiveness (473), as well as “a miracle of sincerity” (446) and “the most

admirable image of love in all of Shakespeare” (447). Carol Thomas Neely finds love and true devotion in Desdemona’s end: “Her last request, ‘Commend me to my kind lord,’ not only conveys her forgiveness but is one final active effort to restore their mutual love. She is not, however, a willing victim and does not sacrifice herself to Othello, although she does not attribute guilt to him either” (125). Indeed, although she cannot name it, Neely sees something very strong in Desdemona: “Emilia supports retaliation [...] though, like Bianca, she practices acceptance. Desdemona’s final couplet suggests that she is groping for a third response, one that is midway between ‘grace’ and ‘revenge,’ one that would be more active than acceptance yet more loving than retaliation” (Neely 117). The third, unnamable thing that Desdemona reaches for is love, its capacity to forgive and its quality that “believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” Neely never puts the exact word to it, but she certainly sees the feature there. All of these critics see the elements of love and forgiveness very strongly in Desdemona, and they prize this virtue highly.

However, many critics do not find this love or forgiveness to be a noble or useful characteristic in Othello’s bride. A.C. Bradley takes a rather dim view of Desdemona’s kindness: “Desdemona’s suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores” (21). By Bradley’s standard, Desdemona’s kindness to her husband does not represent a gesture of goodness on her part, but in fact an unwilled display of innocent sweetness on the part of one not wise enough to know when to stop loving. Furthermore, Bradley apparently believes that her love has rendered Desdemona unable to defend herself and utterly helpless:

The suffering of Desdemona. This is, unless I mistake, the most nearly intolerable spectacle that Shakespeare offers us. For one thing, it is *mere* suffering; and, *ceteris paribus*, that is much worse to witness than suffering that issues in action. [...] the chief reason of her helplessness only

makes the sight of her suffering more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. (21).

Bradley does not regard Desdemona's love as a source of or impetus for action. The Desdemona he reads continues incapable of achievement, to say nothing of reaction, let alone saving herself or her husband – further proof that he considers her a kicked dog. Indeed, when Bradley sees Desdemona's inner strength, he takes it more as a manifestation of the proper, submissive woman:

In her brief wedded life she appeared again chiefly as the sweet and submissive being of her girlhood; and the strength of her soul, first evoked by love, found scope to show itself only in a love which, when hardly repulsed, blamed only its own pain; when bruised, only gave forth a more exquisite fragrance; and when rewarded with death, summoned its last labouring breath to save its murderer. (35).

Bradley registers the love in Desdemona when he recognizes that she uses her last breath to attempt to save Othello. However, he acknowledges the love present in her but does not value the choice that comes with that love, instead seeing it as the perfume of a bruised flower, neglecting to point out that that perfume, though sweet to smell, has been involuntarily produced and unwillingly shared. He values the beauty of her pain and suffering more than the activeness and force of love she demonstrates until her death. Though these critics recognize the love in Desdemona, they downgrade it and show it to be useless to her.

Even critics who see love as present in Desdemona do not always view that love as an *active* part of her. Neely sums up quite succinctly the opinions many Othello critics hold of Desdemona when she points out that for many of them, “the source of her sainthood seems a passivity verging on catatonia” (106). Many critics who recognize a loving and forgiving nature in Desdemona do not conceive of that nature as also rich in agency. Linda Bamber, for example, sees Desdemona as passively acting out her nature:

It is not only the women of doubtful morality in Shakespeare who have fixed characters: the good are as inviolable as the bad ones are incorrigible. [...] The values and loyalties of these characters seem less an accomplishment than the principles of their dramatic identity. It does not seem that such women *exert* themselves – as the heroes do – to be true to their best selves. [...] Their identities are a part they cannot help playing, not something they achieve. (9).

Bamber considers Desdemona a cipher, Venice's physical manifestation of love and charity, not a character in the modern sense with an involved backstory or an emotional sphere of her own.

By that standard, there can be no agency or volition in Desdemona's acts of forgiveness and acceptance – Desdemona remains incorruptibly good not because she “exerts [herself...] to be true to [her] best self” but because she represents incorruptible goodness. Likewise, Ania

Loomba constructs a passive, almost agency-less Desdemona:

As Alan Sinfield says, Desdemona seems even more discontinuous than Othello because she is 'less a developing consciousness than a series of positions that women are conventionally supposed to occupy ... (She) makes sense not as a continuous subjectivity ... but in terms of the stories about women that were and are told in patriarchal ideology.' (Loomba 180).

To Loomba, Desdemona does not show development as a character but instead a representation of the things that Venetian society and Elizabethan culture would have expected a woman to be.

Again, the interpretation diminishes Desdemona's power to *choose* to exercise love. These critics see Desdemona as a proper, sedate Venetian donna, not an agent in control of her life and actions. Some critics, such as Janet Adelman, in fact view Desdemona's final act of love – her absolution of her husband – as the opposite of agency:

Her mysterious final words [...] register the absorption of her self into his, even as they shift the blame from her kind lord to the 'I' who has become nobody; they therefore function simultaneously to mark the extent of her tragedy and to reassure Shakespeare's audience – and perhaps Shakespeare himself -- that her potentially dangerous self-assertion has been curbed, hence that she fully deserves the sanctity that the play finally bestows on her. (Adelman 74).

In Adelman's analysis of the final scene, Desdemona does not make an active decision to preserve her relationship with her husband. Instead, Adelman reads in Desdemona's final words

an erasure of self, a subsuming of her identity into her husband. Adelman's interpretation presents Desdemona as lacking agency by the end, as no longer the powerful female she started the play. Indeed, by Adelman's standard, Desdemona's end only becomes tragic when she no longer desires to assert herself as an individual the way she does at the start. Evidently, Adelman does not value the intense nature of Desdemona's love in her version of the tragedy. However, possibly the most insightful statement about the way critical interpretations handle Desdemona's love comes from the aforementioned Carol Neely, when discussing pro-Othello critics:

All [critics] emphasize her active, loving, passionate sensuality and extol her worth. An effect of their focus is, however, that she, more than Iago, becomes the cause of Othello's destruction; it is her relaxed, frank sexuality and the passionate response it arouses in Othello which generate the tragedy. These critics show how Desdemona's virtues catalyze Othello's sexual anxieties, but they fail to emphasize enough that she has the potential to provide a cure for them. (108).

Here, Neely calls attention to an important void in the critical discussion. Even in Neely's own discussion, though, the role Desdemona, with her love, tries to play in the redemption of Othello remains an unexplored issue. Although these critics address the issue of love, they overlook or ignore its power.

This chapter will examine and demonstrate the love inherent in Desdemona, and to a lesser extent, in her foil Emilia. This quality, in these women, represents not a passive reaction to their lives, nor the inbred behaviors of Venetian society, as it has been seen by some critics, but an active choice on their part. Love is an ability, and love is an action. Recognizing this fact, the chapter will examine the way love influences the behavior of the characters and thereby the outcome and genre of *Othello*.

Despite mixed critical opinions about Desdemona's love, that love defines her. Desdemona's first incredible act of love, which forms the crux of the drama, actually occurs prior to the play: Desdemona's selection of Othello for her husband. The radical nature of her

choice can perhaps be best seen in Othello's description of their marriage: "For she had eyes, and she chose me" (3.3.220)²³. Desdemona, in the face of tremendous familial and social opposition – as seen in the fact that her father could call Othello before the Senate for the crime of marrying her without his permission – chooses to marry with Othello²⁴. Indeed, Desdemona plays an active role in their courtship, initiating the relationship:

she thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story.
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake. (1.3.189-192).

Desdemona, in her love for Othello, decides to move him to court her, letting him know she would be receptive to his advances and then instructing him how best to advance. In the face of overwhelming social convention, Desdemona loves Othello and actively pursues that love, asserting her independence and strength of will. Desdemona's love for Othello and her willingness to choose him in defiance of social convention set the play in motion.

Desdemona's truly loving nature runs as a current through the entire play, extending as a virtue even to characters other than her husband. Despite the choleric Brabantio expresses upon the discovery of his daughter's elopement – going so far as to stake his own life on the conviction that his daughter would never elope with a black man (1.3.203-205) – Desdemona demonstrates from her first arrival on stage her capacity for love. When pressed to speak, Desdemona speaks of honor and duty:

DESDEMONA: My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty:
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me

²³ All citations will be from the 2004 Folger's edition, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine.

²⁴ Desdemona is not alone in Shakespeare's canon for choosing her own husband. Imogen from *Cymbeline* also marries against her father's wishes, in her case choosing a man of a different socio-economic class instead of a different race. However, Shakespeare treats both marriages as equally sound and valid. As A.C. Bradley comments, "What is there in the play to show that Shakespeare regarded [Desdemona's] marriage differently from Imogen's?" (38).

How to respect you; you are the lord of duty,
 I am hitherto your daughter; but here's my husband,
 And so much duty as my mother show'd
 To you, preferring you before her father,
 So much I challenge that I may profess
 Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3. 208-218)

Desdemona's address shows her the suitable, even-tempered Venetian donna. Although such a speech does not seem bent on love, she demonstrates here she can "suffer[...] long" and be "not easily provoked." These qualities will be tested when her father promptly disowns her, saying he "would rather adopt a child than get it" (1.3.221) and he has become "glad at [his] soul [he] had no other child" (1.3.226). Yet Desdemona bears these insults quietly, without appearing to take offence. Furthermore, she demonstrates here a little represented quality of love, that love "does not behave itself unseemly." By emphasizing her desire to do her duty, Desdemona emphasizes how proper her love and her relationship with Othello are. Desdemona's entire first speech remains respectable. Not until later, when Desdemona begins addressing the Duke and demanding the right to follow her husband into war does Desdemona announce, "That [she] did love the Moor to live with him, / [her] downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world" (1.3.281-283). However, these more assertive lines are addressed to the Duke, not to the father she makes much effort not to offend. She also balances the aggression of these lines with a more proper immediate follow-up:

my heart's subdued
 Even to the very quality of my lord:
 I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
 And to his honour and his valiant parts
 Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate" (1.2.283-287).

Her love has settled her heart, turning violent passions to something that "is kind" and "doth not behave itself unseemly." She also "consecrate[s]" herself to her husband, treating her love for her husband as a sacrament. Moreover, when she loses her home in Venice because Othello must

go to war, she offers not to reside with her father anymore lest she “put [her] father in impatient thoughts/ By being in his eye” (1.3.277-278). By offering to sacrifice for her father’s happiness, Desdemona once again demonstrates her willingness to “bear[...] all things” and “not behave [herself] unseemly.” Desdemona’s first appearance establishes to the audience that she is a woman of love. She demonstrates not only her love but the active nature of that love. Although she has much cause for passion in this scene, she does not vent any against her father, because of her love for him. Her passion she reserves for her husband, which she expresses actively before the Duke, when she asserts her right to follow her husband. In her interactions with her father and the Senate, the audience can see that Desdemona does not come to her marriage a meek girl but an assured young woman strong in her love.

Desdemona also never seems to hold against Iago the numerous rude and disrespectful things he says to her in Act 2 Scene 1. When Iago first speaks with Desdemona on stage, he tells her that women like her and Emilia “rise to play and go to bed to work” (2.1.128), implying that all women are sexually loose, a comment that would be offensive enough without the connotations of “working” in bed. Iago also delivers a small lecture on the future of women, concluding that the best a woman can hope for in life is “to suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (2.1.175), which suggests that Iago prefers his women barefoot and pregnant, hardly a future one could imagine Desdemona seeking for herself. However, despite the offensiveness of Iago’s comments, Desdemona simply scoffs, “O most lame and impotent conclusion! Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband” (2.1.176-177). Although she mocks and rejects his unpleasant conclusions, she never appears to hold his words against him beyond that moment, demonstrating what most modern readers would consider to be a remarkable ability to “bear[...] all things.” Still, even as she teases and never steps into the bounds of cruelty, it remains worth

noting that Desdemona not only never encourages Emilia to bow to her husband's will or to subsume herself into her husband; she encourages Emilia to question her husband's behavior and continue using her own judgment. Desdemona believes in love but also in independence of will. Still, Desdemona's performance of a generally loving nature does not stop with this first moment together with Iago. Desdemona will "think[...] no evil," even when it might be deserved.

Othello does his very best to test the limits of Desdemona's *caritas*, confirming for the audience that her love knows no bounds. After Othello shouts at her and aggressively demands the handkerchief of her in 3.4, Desdemona does not hold his anger against him. Although this display of jealousy surprises her, she is quick to excuse it: "I ne'er saw this before. / Sure, there's some wonder in this handkerchief. / I am most unhappy in the loss of it" (3.4.117-119). She then promptly proceeds to reject the notion that his mind has been infected with jealousy, and instead assumes that his mind has been slightly turned by the pressures of command or of affairs of state:

DESDEMONA: Something, sure, of state,
 Either from Venice, or some unhatch'd practice
 Made demonstrable here in Cyprus to him,
 Hath puddled his clear spirit: and in such cases
 Men's natures wrangle with inferior things
 Though great ones are their object. 'Tis even so;
 For let our finger ache, and it indues
 Our other healthful members even to that sense
 Of pain: nay, we must think men are not gods,
 Nor of them look for such observances
 As for the Bridal. Beshrew me much, Emilia,
 I was, unhandsome warrior as I am,
 Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;
 But now I find I had suborn'd the witness.
 And he's indicted falsely (3.4. 160-175).

Desdemona demonstrates well before her death scene a habit of shifting the blame away from her husband, even when the situation seems to merit it. Shifting from having initially blamed Othello and allowed Emilia to say that Othello might be something jealous in his obsession over the handkerchief (3.4.116-117), Desdemona now blames the stress of his work either in Venice

or Cyprus for “puddl[ing] his clear spirit,” and causing his distemper. Desdemona creates his excuses for him. She then reminds herself that “we must think men are no gods/ Nor of them look for such observances/ As for the Bridal,” as if to remind herself that her husband is merely human, and therefore she cannot expect Othello to be perfect all of the time. These defenses, one would think, would suffice for letting him entirely off the hook; however, Desdemona manages to carry her defense of Othello even further. Using legal language, such as witness, and having “arraign[ed] his unkindness with [her] soul,” Desdemona mentally finds Othello not guilty of any offences against her and then accuses herself of “suborn[ing] the witness” and falsely indicting him. Not only does Desdemona manage to entirely absolve Othello of any blame for his actions in the handkerchief scene, she actually reworks the situation, making the conflict all her fault. Although some might see Desdemona’s willingness to forgive Othello as a sign of foolishness, one must remember that Desdemona chooses to believe what she says at this moment. She does not stumble onto her conclusion by accident but intentionally persuades herself that things with Othello are alright. Some critics might argue that Desdemona forgives Othello because she cannot help herself, that Desdemona represents not a complex psychology but a male fantasy of the ideal woman. However, if that were truly the case, Desdemona would not need to work out excuses and forgivenesses for Othello the way that she does here – she would never have recognized and admitted that he has done something wrong or shown some jealousy, an admission she does tacitly make to Emilia after Othello leaves:

EMILIA : Is not this man jealous?

DESDEMONA : I ne'er saw this before. (3.4.116-117).

Desdemona’s willingness and ability to recognize that Othello might be in the wrong before she forgives him demonstrates that, although she performs love to an extreme degree, she can recognize the failings in her husband and be hurt or displeased by them. This capacity shows her

to be more complex than a mere cipher and indicates that her forgiveness has an active cause. Desdemona chooses to believe Othello blameless, to exercise her manner of love towards him.

From all appearances, she has forgiven Iago for his accusations of infidelity against her confidante. When Emilia invokes Iago's accusations of infidelity in a conversation (4.2 171-173), Desdemona retains her focus on Othello: "What shall I do to win my lord again?/ Good friend, go to him. For by this light of heaven, / I know not how I lost him" (4.2.176-178). Not only does Desdemona not take this moment to share in Emilia's anger at Iago over the past slight to Emilia's honor, Desdemona actually calls Iago "good friend" and trusts him to bear intelligence betwixt her lord and her. Evidently, she has not only, when it comes to Iago, forgiven all things, she also thinks no further evil of him. What is more, when Emilia presents Desdemona with the possibility that someone might be lying and persuading her husband that she has been unfaithful to him – which is exactly what is happening – Desdemona responds, "If any such there be, heaven pardon him" (4.2.158). She presents a spectacular, almost divine capacity to be kind, to forgive. Unknowingly, Desdemona actually gives her forgiveness to the man setting her own murder in motion.

Furthermore, when Emilia, her less than forgiving textual counterpart, suggests a scene later that Desdemona consider the forms of revenge available to a wife, such as adultery and cuckolding, Desdemona rejects such options out of hand: "God me such uses send / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend" (4.3.116-117). Desdemona exercises a great deal of charity in that moment, choosing to forgive her husband's actions and to act in accordance to that forgiveness, refusing to "pick bad from bad." She certainly appears to have embraced the idea that love should be "not easily provoked." Despite everything that Othello has done to her, Desdemona desires to "by bad mend," rejecting the proffered chance to leave him or seek her

comforts outside the marriage. In doing so, Desdemona demonstrates her charitable, loving impulse, one which “suffereth long,” bearing with the unpleasantness of her marriage, and does “not behave itself unseemly” and “rejoiceth not in iniquity,” both of which would be true of an extra-marital affair. When faced with the less than charming aspects of life or situations that are unfair or unkind, Desdemona apparently responds by exercising love and forgiveness, rather than practicing anger or blame. Indeed, from all appearances, her love has no limit.

Nonetheless, Othello’s offenses against her become more numerous, especially when he calls her a whore and insults her fidelity. His words are vicious:

OTHELLO: What committed!

Impudent Strumpet!

DESDEMONA: By heaven, you do me wrong.

OTHELLO: Are you not a strumpet?

DESDEMONA: No, as I am a Christian:

If to preserve this vessel for my lord

From any other foul unlawful touch

Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

OTHELLO: What, not a whore?

DESDEMONA: No, as I shall be saved.

OTHELLO: Is’t possible?

DESDEMONA: O, heaven forgive us!

OTHELLO: I cry you mercy then:

I took you for that cunning whore of Venice

That married with Othello. (4.2.93-105).

Desdemona vouches for her chastity by her soul, and yet Othello is so enraged that he does not even value that promise. Audience members doubtless find it difficult, after watching this brutal, cringe-inducing scene, to forgive the man who calls his chaste and loving wife “impudent strumpet” and insult of insults, “cunning whore of Venice.” It only gets worse when he says, “there’s money for your pains” (4.2.108-109), likely throwing some at her or Emilia, before leaving. His comments surrounding prostitution tie him back to the earlier comments made by Iago that required Desdemona’s forgiveness, such as the comment that women “rise to play and go to bed to work.” Yet, after these attacks, when Emilia insists that his mind has been corrupted

by jealousy and false companions, that “some cogging, cozening slave, [...] devised this slander” (4.2.155-156), Desdemona, instead of expressing anger, reaffirms her love and her fidelity to her husband:

And ever will – though he do shake me off
To beggarly divorcement – love him dearly,
And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love. (4.2.185-190).

In a chilling moment, Desdemona foreshadows the possibility that Othello might make an attempt upon her life – although her prediction seems more tied to the idea that his cruelty might cause her to die of a broken heart than that he will smother her to death with a pillow on their marital bed. However, instead of fleeing from him, Desdemona promises herself, Emilia, and the audience, that she would not let such aggressions on his part taint her love for him or her willingness to exercise her forgiving nature in their relationship. She holds the faith that Love will conquer Violence. Once again, Desdemona chooses to engage in acts of charity and forgiveness with her husband.

From this point, Desdemona does not stop exercising more forgiveness than other characters deem wise. Against the wishes and feelings of her companion, Desdemona forgives Othello’s unexplained anger, even though he never asks for her forgiveness, and continues to see only good in him:

EMILIA: I would you had never seen him.
DESDEMONA: So would not I. My love doth so approve him
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns –
Prithee, unpin me – have grace and favor in them. (4.3.19-22)

Even at this moment, after her husband has publicly struck her and called her a whore, Desdemona demonstrates a level of forgiveness and acceptance that sets her apart, and above, the other characters. Even though she has admitted he is not a god but a mere man (3.4.169), and although his actions have shown him to be a less than exemplary one, Desdemona still refuses to

repent her marriage. She still sees the “grace and favor” in Othello’s looks and actions, even “his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns,” despite everything. Here, she surpasses “bear[ing] all things” and moves into “believ[ing] all things, hop[ing] all things.” She forgives Othello for his trespasses against her and continues to look for and find the good in him, demonstrating continued love.

By the end, Desdemona will take this action to a whole other level. Even after the brutal murder in their marital bed, when Emilia presses Desdemona to reveal her assailant’s identity, Desdemona shows herself not only capable of but willing to offer forgiveness:

DESDEMONA: A guiltless death I die.

EMILIA: O, who hath done this deed?

DESDEMONA: Nobody. I myself. Farewell.

Commend me to my kind lord. (5.2.150-154).

Desdemona’s last act before the audience is to look at the man who killed her, absorb entirely the blame for his actions and ask for his good opinion of her. Indeed, her words not only forgive him, they offer him total absolution – by taking on herself the guilt for her death, she indemnifies him from any criminal prosecution or earthly justice. By declaring her death “guiltless” and then saying she did “this deed” herself, Desdemona instructs Emilia, and to a certain extent her husband, that no guilty party need be hunted down for her death. Even if Emilia pressed the issue to the outside authorities, like Lodovico, who are friends with Othello, Othello could hold Desdemona’s dying words up as an evidence of his innocence²⁵. After Desdemona’s final speech, Othello need only follow the story she provided for her death, and he can survive his actions and the play unscathed, except possibly for the emotional scarring, which she also seems to hope to spare him. Although some critics, such as Janet Adelman, see this forgiveness as a weakness on Desdemona’s part, a moment when Desdemona subsumes herself into Othello, at

²⁵ Of course, her dying words would likely not be enough to expunge the stain of his actions. However, they might do enough to shield his life.

this moment she really makes her final decision, choosing to make her life and her death *mean something*. She could have *chosen* to hate him, to reject him, to use her last breath to curse him, but she did not do these things. Desdemona chooses to use the end of her life to save her husband. Desdemona's life *and* her death are defined by her love, rendering that trait, of all others, her most important characteristic.

Desdemona's confidante, Emilia, on the other hand, is not overburdened with charitable inclinations. Emilia presents a much more bitter figure than Desdemona:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man.
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food:
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,
They belch us. (3.4.120-123).

Considering who Emilia is married to, the audience is not likely to be surprised that Emilia sees men as cruel creatures who gorge on the women before spitting them out. However, merited or not, this statement does not provide any comforting illusions that Emilia is the forgiving sort or one to overlook men's failings. Indeed, Emilia's response to male foibles generally presents bitterness: "Some such squire he was / That turn'd your wit the seamy side without, / And made you to suspect me with the Moor" (4.2. 171-173). From the sounds of things, Iago accused Emilia of infidelity to her face, and either she somehow created sufficient reasonable doubt that Iago did not divorce her, leave her, or kill her, or Iago just accused her and did not do anything about it. Either way, she does not seem to have forgiven him for the accusation the way that Desdemona so readily forgives Othello for the same offense. She certainly holds on to the memory and invokes it during their disagreement. Furthermore, when faced with the possibility that a man has caused Othello to suspect Desdemona with another man, Emilia does not at all share Desdemona's inclination towards forgiveness:

DESDEMONA: If there be any such, heaven pardon him.
EMILIA: A halter pardon him, and hell gnaw his bones. (4.2.158-159).

Emilia's anger at a slight to her friend's honor – though possibly heightened by the fact that she once faced a similar slight – extends not only to a death sentence but even beyond the grave, through to damnation and eternal torture. As far as cursing and damning, Emilia has quite a gift for it.

Emilia exercises her agency as liberally as Desdemona, but not for acts of kindness.

Unlike Desdemona, Emilia *likes* the idea of revenge. This interest, moreover, is not limited only to the men who have wronged her or hers. Unlike her friend, Emilia believes in revenge on the part of all women:

But I do think it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite;
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?
I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too: and have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.97-114).

Emilia finds men at fault for most of the sins attributed to women, from jealousy to sexual incontinence²⁶, and she does not feel at all shy about saying it. She wants revenge for all women, herself and Desdemona included. She suggests the viability of these revenges when she tells her friend, “Then let them use us well: else let them know/ The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.”

Apparently what is good for the gander is good for the goose, and any sin committed by a

²⁶Notably, most of these qualities are mentioned in Posthumus' infamous “woman's part” speech in *Cymbeline* Act 2 Scene 5.

husband is most certainly fair game. In this instance, it hardly takes a great leap of imagination to know what revenge Emilia means – cuckolding. Although the text gives no indication that Emilia did engage in an act of cuckolding²⁷, she certainly does not have a problem with the

²⁷ The nature of the relationship between Othello and Emilia remains one of the most surprising yet essential questions in *Othello*. While the two do not spend much time together on stage, Iago certainly has given Othello and Desdemona's relationship a great deal of thought and come to the conclusion that they had an adulterous relationship: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat – the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards" (2.1.317-319). Furthermore, he claims others share this view: "it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / 'Has done my office." (1.3.430-431). Of course, Iago has no proof of these suspicions, but the absence of the ocular proof does not keep the thought from eating him up inside. While it remains rather easy to dismiss the question of infidelity between Othello and Emilia as simply a part of Iago's twisted, jealous musings, if one overlooks or fails to truly consider the question, the issue becomes a snag.

Interestingly, and possibly unfortunately for Desdemona, some evidence suggests that Iago might not be wholly wrong about his wife. Emilia denies to her husband's face that she would be unfaithful to him and claims he only suspects her because someone falsely accused her: "Some such squire he was / That turn'd your wit the seamy side without, / And made you to suspect me with the Moor" (4.2. 171-173). She speaks, to her husband, as though the allegations made against her were categorically false. However, Emilia's own words to Desdemona are not quite so categorical:

Nor I neither [would be unfaithful] by this heavenly light;
I might do't as well i' the dark. [...]
The world's a huge thing: it is a great price
For a small vice (4.3.75-76, 78-79).

If Emilia thinks it not so wrong to have extra-marital sex, especially if it would advance her husband, then it becomes quite possible that Emilia propositioned Othello – possibly even did sleep with him – in the hopes of advancing Iago professionally. Othello is Iago's superior, and Iago was, prior to the play, vying for the promotion that Michael Cassio later received. Setting aside the more usual motives of love or lust – Emilia never hints that she finds Othello physically or sexually appealing – Emilia had reason to pursue a sexual liaison with Othello.

Notably, Othello is not the only man with whom Iago suspects his wife. When choosing Cassio as the appropriate other victim of his plot, he remarks, "I fear Cassio with my nightcap, too" (2.1.329). He is less insistent on the idea that Emilia might actually have had sex with Cassio, but he does not seem to doubt the notion that, if Cassio had propositioned Emilia, she would have consented. Iago's willingness to suspect Emilia with two other men does seem to indicate a certain paranoia on his part, which strongly discredits any thoughts, beliefs, or suspicions he might have about his own wife.

Critical opinion also agrees that Iago's arguments on his wife's infidelity lack persuasion. Harold Bloom certainly does not think Iago's insinuations will work for the audience: "Early in the play, Iago tells us what neither he nor we believe, not because of any shared regard for Emilia but because Othello is too grand for this" (441). Bloom's statement is not bulletproof. Saying Iago does not believe his suspicions about his wife presents problems, as that idea involves believing that Iago is not being honest with the audience, which makes it difficult to track or trust much of the play. If the reasons he gives the audience are false, then there is no apparent reason for his actions. Furthermore, saying that Iago believes Othello "too grand" for anything presents difficulties as he rarely demonstrates anything resembling a high opinion of him. Whether or not the audience believes Othello "too grand" is a different question. The audience is evidently meant to think highly of him, and there is little, arguably no, textual evidence that Othello sleeps with other men's wives, especially the wives of subordinates. Mostly, there remains an audience conviction that Othello loves Desdemona too much to have dallied with someone else.

However, by far the most compelling evidence on the issue of Emilia and Desdemona's relationship would have to be Emilia's relationship with Desdemona. Little textual evidence indicates that Emilia is close to her husband – in fact, most evidence indicates that if she and her husband were ever close, that time is long since passed, probably replaced with a great deal of bitterness. Indeed, the only close relationship she seems to have is with Desdemona. She follows Desdemona to Cyprus, challenges both Othello and her husband to proclaim the truth of Desdemona's death, and as she asks as she dies to lie by Desdemona. There is no reason to believe, on the issue of

notion of a revenge-cuckolding. Indeed, when it comes to Desdemona's relationship with Othello, Emilia appears to be suggesting it as a workable life choice. Or, at least, a reasonable moment of revenge for his past offences. As Desdemona believes in love, Emilia believes in revenge.

Not only does Emilia believe in revenge over forgiveness, she also eschews other forms of love. Indeed, Desdemona becomes the only person for whom the audience sees Emilia have any real affection. Emilia is never shown to have a great deal of love to spare for her companion's husband. Some critics, such as Eldred Jones, see Emilia's feelings about Othello to be somewhat conflicted but largely negative:

She is a woman of the world, quick to apply her popular wisdom to her experiences. She is sceptical of Desdemona's confidence in the constancy of Othello's nature[...]. She represents the type of woman who would have known of the popular reputation of Moors as being very prone to jealousy. She does not, however, show any contempt for Othello before the murder. After it, by contrast, her words are very suggestive of the traditional attitudes[...]. She had kept her feelings bottled up out of deference to her mistress's choice. But when, as it must have appeared to her, her worst fears of the Moor are justified, all her traditional contempt comes pouring out. (Jones 42-43).

Although Emilia did not always keep from Desdemona all of her disapproval, Emilia remains, as Jones correctly points out, polite to Othello during Desdemona's life, referring to him as Desdemona's husband and lord, not just "the Moor." However, these respects go out the window when he has killed Desdemona, as he no longer has a connection to one she loves and no longer deserves any of her respect or affection. Whether or not Emilia's distrust of Othello is as racially motivated as Jones found it, Emilia certainly never includes Othello in the sphere of those to whom she extends clemency. While Emilia never blames Desdemona to her face for her decision to marry Othello, she certainly blames Othello for the difficulties the marriage brings

an affair, that Emilia simply would not do something like that to Iago, but there is every reason to believe that Emilia would not do something like that to Desdemona.

her mistress. Still, out of what is likely a deep concern for Desdemona's happiness, Emilia keeps those thoughts to herself while Desdemona lives, granting forgiveness apparently not to Othello so much as to Desdemona's spouse. When Othello loses that vaunted status in her eyes, he also loses all access to her love. Though, of course, Othello is not the only Venetian man to whom Emilia does not offer love. When Othello tells Emilia that her husband was the one who turned his mind the seamy side without, Emilia is as good as her previous word, damning him as she damned the yet unknown man who caused Othello to call Desdemona whore: "If he say so, may his pernicious soul / Rot a grain a day! He lies to th' heart! / She was too fond of her most filthy bargain" (5.2.190-192). Emilia never showed much in the way of love to her husband, but when she discovers that her husband is responsible for the death of her mistress, Emilia casts him out entirely. Though she and Desdemona are by all appearances exceptionally close, Emilia lacks Desdemona's charitable nature.

The difficulty remains, when choosing between such disparate women, in determining which female the play supports, or at least positions as the voice of normality and/or uprightness. Many critics see Emilia as a voice of feminism and female empowerment when she assures Desdemona that women have stomachs as men have and says that women should have their own freedoms as men do. Critics also see the bitterness there when she states that the evils women do, their men instruct them to. Many see the charity and love in Desdemona when she declares before the Senate that she saw Othello's visage in his mind, and they feel it again when Othello reminds himself, Iago, and the viewer that she had eyes and she chose him. Many critics would also not hesitate to point out that Desdemona *dies*. True, Emilia dies, but her death stems more from her husband's nature than her own.

The play does not position either female as the normative voice. They represent rather two separate aspects of life. Emilia, with her realism and bitter pragmatism, represents the earthy approach. She presents the ordinary, the human. The play does not present her as a bad person, but rather as no one's best self. She confronts the world as it is, but she does not seek to improve it. Desdemona, on the other hand, when confronted with the negative aspects of the world, reaches for a response which Neely aptly describes as "more active than acceptance yet more loving than retaliation" (117). Desdemona's inclinations, her natural bent towards love and charity, show her to be more inclined and dedicated to the course of love. She achieves a true state of grace²⁸. She represents the higher nature, the one towards which people strive. However, such a nature is not always possible or practical. The play shows neither female as normative, but love remains the virtue one should reach for, even if one cannot attain it.

Critical disagreement aside, however, Desdemona's deeply loving and charitable nature, so much more so than that of her realist counterpart, Emilia, drives the play. Had Desdemona not so frequently chosen to forgive Othello, they would not even have been in that bedchamber for her to forgive him for her murder. Had Desdemona been more like Emilia, the results would have been different. As Emilia puts it, if men "break out in peevish jealousies, / Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us, [...] / Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge. [...] / Then let them use us well: else let them know, / The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.99-101,103, 113-114). Had Desdemona been of Emilia's mind, when Othello hit her, she would have left him, and either headed back to Venice or actually gone to seek her happiness in the arms of Michael Cassio. Although these endings

²⁸ "Whenever uttered, the word carried a moral charge. *Grace* referred to the monarch's divine right and authority, blessings from God, 'a mark of divine favor,' an 'individual virtue or excellence, divine in its origin,' and 'Mercy, clemency; hence, pardon or forgiveness.' To be in a state of grace, or to possess grace, was to be favored by and influenced by God, even to be godlike in one's behavior. Grace had to do with the condition and fate of one's soul" (Tassi 263).

would not have made for the best tragedy in English literature, they would have been reasonably tragic endings. However, by rejecting these options, by *choosing* to forgive him, by *deciding* to stay, Desdemona does everything she can to redirect the play into the bounds of a romantic comedy. If Desdemona had not been so full of forgiveness or love, she would not have made such an effort to restore and preserve their marriage. Without her love, the marriage would have been almost certainly doomed upfront.

One cannot deny, though, that love would be, although not a useless quality, a somewhat unnecessary one, if the character were surrounded by characters who never did anything to require forgiveness. Therefore, this chapter will examine the consequences of the various acts of violence committed by Othello and his textual complement, Iago, especially, though not exclusively, the acts they commit against the women in their lives. As his wife surpasses Emilia in her forgiveness, Othello surpasses Iago in his crimes, murdering his wife directly for a supposed infidelity, whereas Iago murders his wife considerably after his suspicions of any indiscretion. Still, the question remains and will be examined, of whether the violence alone would suffice to turn this play into a tragedy.

Of *Othello's* men, Othello shows himself to be the most violent and even more the most direct and vengeance oriented. When faced with the apparent deterioration of his marriage, upon hearing the story of Cassio's dream liaison with Desdemona, Othello plans violence against his spouse: "I'll tear her all to pieces" (3.3.490). Notably, his initial intention is not the pillow-smothering of the play's end, nor could it in any way be described as passive or bloodless like a poisoning, let alone as efficient as one might imagine from a military leader. His first thoughts are cruel, violent, and hands on. Othello might not jump directly to violence at the news of the

affair, but when he gets there, he is there all the way, his plan direct and brutal. The violence of Othello's reaction escalates from there:

OTHELLO: I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me? [...]

Get me some poison, Iago; this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago.

IAGO: Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.

OTHELLO: Good, good. The justice of it pleases. Very good. (4.1.219,223-229)

Othello's plan increases from tearing her to chopping her, presumably with his sword, into small pieces. Evidently, the situation grows more dire. However, though these comments might sound like the aggressive exclamations of a wounded man, Othello's plans soon move from the angry shouted plans to stab his wife to death to a colder fury, a direct plan for her death: poisoning. Although poisonings are passive murders in nature, the plan Othello devises *is* one that he can put into effect immediately and without attracting a great deal of attention to himself, features that would likely appeal to Othello's inner military strategist. Furthermore, Othello's statement that he will "not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide [his] mind again" demonstrates Othello's direction. He understands that his resolve could be weakened by an encounter with his wife, and so he quickly forms plans that will allow him to enact his murderous revenge without the encounter²⁹.

One must note in both of the aforementioned examples the desire for vengeance inherent in both. Unlike some of his male compatriots, when Othello feels betrayed by his wife, he reaches for violent revenge. As Carol Thomas Neely puts it, when faced with the destruction of his marriage, Othello "attempt[s] to replace his love for Desdemona with a vow of vengeance [...] through which [...] he can restore his heroism and control by regaining the love and dependence

²⁹ Admittedly, when faced with his loving wife, Othello *does* hesitate before completing his attack – pausing at the sight of her pale marble body and promising her that he "will kill [her] and love [her] after," (5.2.20-21) as well as expostulating with her and giving her time to pray for her sins. However, even after that brief pause, Othello returns to his plan and executes her.

he fears he has lost" (119-120). The aggression, while not Othello's predominant quality, replaces the feelings Othello cannot control. It might not be surprising that Othello practices vicious retribution against his wife. Othello's second closest relationship is with Iago, and when Othello discovers that Iago has tricked him into destroying his wife and marriage, Othello reacts with retaliation:

OTHELLO: If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee

[He stabs Iago]

LODOVICO: Wrench his sword from him.

IAGO: I bleed, sir, but not killed.

OTHELLO: I am not sorry neither. I'd have thee live,

For in my sense 'tis happiness to die. (5.2.336-341)

Not until Iago has determined that he will not die does Othello decide that there might be something better than stabbing his enemy until he dies, arriving unsurprisingly at a level of damning not unlike Emilia's – condemning the person detested to the worst fate imaginable. Othello's reactions to the threats to his well-being, which end up being directed towards his wife, are violent, direct, and often vengeful in orientation.

In contrast, Othello's textual counterpart, Iago, wields violence as a tool, using it as a means to control his wife and situations, not attacking her in vengeance. Although Iago does practice acts of violence and vengeance, his acts of vengeance are slowly thought out, not direct and brutal moves, and for the vast majority of *Othello*, his acts target only other men, not his wife. The audience knows from Iago's asides that Iago has long suspected his wife of infidelity: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat – the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards" (2.1.317-319). The audience also knows from Emilia – "Some such squire he was / That turn'd your wit the seamy side without, / And made you to suspect me with the Moor" (4.2. 171-173) – that Iago has confronted his wife with his suspicions, at least his suspicions about Othello, if not his suspicions about Cassio. However, the

audience will also note that Emilia remains very much alive at this point; therefore, one may safely conclude that whatever reaction Iago had to Emilia's supposed betrayal, it did not involve her sudden murder. Indeed, aside from being a generally nasty and unpleasant person – something he quite likely could have been before his accusations³⁰ – there are no real textual implications that Iago sought any retribution against his wife. Of course, Emilia does not survive the play. However, Iago's fatal attack on his wife – stabbing her (5.2.382) – stems more from his need to control the situation than from retribution. Emilia's intention to “speak as liberal as the north wind” destabilizes and destroys Iago's schemes, exposing him to real danger for almost the first time since his machinations started. For the first time, the audience sees the Iago who slowly planned his vengeance on Othello and Cassio break and panic, and in that alarm, Iago stabs his wife. Unlike Othello, who reached for violence as revenge against his wife and executed that plan swiftly, Iago's attacks, until the play's end, are carefully calculated and not directed towards his wife.

Iago does not demonstrate a desire for a speedy execution for those he believes have wronged him. Iago plays the long game or, with respect to his wife, attempts – and fails – to ignore her. When Iago does finally decide that his wife must die, he executes her very quickly; however, it takes him a very long time to come to that conclusion. Both men experience feelings of anger and aggression towards other characters, even their wives; however, Othello's are the responses that are more direct and immediate.

The most horrifying violence comes in Othello's brutal uxoricide. There is a bizarre balance of violent anger and seeming mercy in this scene, which underlines the awfulness of it

³⁰ As Gohlke points out, “There is no reason to suppose, moreover, that Iago's consistently degraded view of women conceals any less hostile attitude in his actual relations with women. He, after all, like Othello, kills his wife. The difference between the two men lies not in their fear and mistrust of women but in the degree to which they are able to accept an emotional involvement” (155).

all. Although Othello thinks her a damned strumpet, when first he speaks with his wife, Othello bids her seek her redemption:

OTHELLO: If you bethink yourself of any crime
 Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
 Solicit for it straight.
 DESDEMONA: Alas, my lord, what do you mean by that?
 OTHELLO: Well, do it, and be brief; I will walk by:
 I would not kill thy unprepared spirit;
 No; heaven forbid! I would not kill thy soul.
 DESDEMONA: Talk you of killing?
 OTHELLO: Ay, I do.
 DESDEMONA: Then heaven
 Have mercy on me!
 OTHELLO: Amen, with all my heart! (5.2.30-40).

Although he plans to murder her earthly body, Othello does not desire to touch her immortal soul. He has not reached the level of anger touched previously by Emilia, when she wished hell would gnaw the bones of the man who defamed Desdemona – not to mention the level Emilia will reach when she discovers her husband was that man: “may his pernicious soul / Rot half a grain a day” (5.2.190-191). Unfortunately, Othello himself has not reached the pinnacle of his aggression in this scene. After a conversation about Cassio, in which Desdemona tries to defend herself, Othello smothers Desdemona in a rage:

OTHELLO: Peace, and be still! [...]
 Take heed of perjury.
 Thou art on thy deathbed. [...]
 Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin;
 For to deny each article with oath
 Cannot remove nor choke the strong conception
 That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.[...]
 DESDEMONA: O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!
 OTHELLO: Down, strumpet!
 DESDEMONA: Kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!
 OTHELLO: Nay, if you strive--
 DESDEMONA: But half an hour!
 OTHELLO: Being done, there is no pause.
 DESDEMONA: But while I say one prayer!
 OTHELLO: It is too late.
He stifles her [...]

OTHELLO: What noise is this? Not dead? not yet quite dead?
 I that am cruel am yet merciful;
 I would not have thee linger in thy pain: So, so. (5.2.56,62-63,66-70,97-105,107-110).

In the middle of the violent murder, the disturbing mercy appears again, with Othello choosing to kill his wife quickly rather than letting her die in pain. However, it cannot be overlooked that Othello did just smother his wife to death on their marital bed while she *begged* him to stop. The violence remains irrefutable, and for most audience members, the play doubtless, at this point, looks unsalvageable.

Although the difference these men's levels of violence might not sound critical to the play's outcome, Othello's violence drives a great deal of the tragedy-inducing aspects of the finale. If Othello had not acted so violently towards his wife, he would not have needed so much of his wife's forgiveness for the play to have had any chance of ending as a comedy. Had Othello simply kept his suspicions to himself or acted non-violently against her, as some of Shakespeare's men, such as Claudio and Master Ford, do, the couple could have redirected their relationship towards a comic resolution, generally portrayed in Shakespeare as a contented and trusting marriage. However, Othello's striking Desdemona and then smothering her require her to exercise a great deal of forgiveness and love to redirect into a comic realm, and even that forgiveness does not succeed in the end.

Following the uxoricide, any reader would be understandable in concluding that Othello and Desdemona could never be transported back to the realm of romantic comedy. With Desdemona murdered, they will never have their happy ending. Even beyond that, because he will doubtless be found guilty of her murder, Othello's death at the hands of the Venetian government is almost entirely assured. Furthermore, as Desdemona has died, she will not be able to use her tremendous love for him to make everything better.

However, the play leaves open a glimmer of hope: Desdemona appears to come back to life. Of course, after her brief conversation with Emilia, she dies for real, but as she gasps out her real last breath, Desdemona still exercises an act of amazing forgiveness and love – a Hail Mary attempt to save her husband's life:

DESDEMONA: A guiltless death I die.
 EMILIA: O, who hath done this deed?
 DESDEMONA: Nobody. I myself. Farewell.
 Commend me to my kind lord. (5.2.150-154).

As previously discussed, Desdemona takes all of Othello's guilt on herself. Of course, Desdemona's efforts to save Othello from Venetian justice – not to mention himself – are thwarted not only by her companion but by her husband:

OTHELLO: Why, how should she be murder'd?
 EMILIA: Alas, who knows?
 OTHELLO: You heard her say herself, it was not I.
 EMILIA: She said so: I must needs report the truth.
 OTHELLO: She's, like a liar, gone to burning hell:
 'Twas I that kill'd her. (5.2.154-159).

At this moment, the audience can reasonably despair of any semblance of a happy ending for the married couple. Not only has Desdemona been murdered, her husband has rejected her attempt to save him, publically taking the blame – “twas I that kill'd her” – before Emilia, a witness unlikely to shield him:

Do thy worst: [...]
 Thou hast not half that power to do me harm
 As I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt!
 As ignorant as dirt! thou hast done a deed –
 I care not for thy sword; I'll make thee known,
 Though I lost twenty lives.--Help! help, ho! help!
 The Moor hath kill'd my mistress! Murder! murder! (5.2.194,198-203).

This rejection of Desdemona's love could have any number of causes. Perhaps Othello has been too stunned by Desdemona's charity to realize what he must do. Perhaps he already knows that he cannot keep this secret for the rest of his life. Othello never explains to the audience why he

rejects Desdemona's final effort to save him, but by rejecting Desdemona's charity in this moment, rejecting her offer to save him, Othello prepares the final blows of the tragedy.

In terms of focusing the outcome of the play, of determining its genre, the violence and the love are related. The level of the violence, especially Othello's, not only sets the play on the path of the tragedy, it also raises the level of love required and utilized on the part of the other characters, especially Desdemona. The burden of saving the couple from a tragic demise and a tragic end rests solely on the shoulders of the loving Desdemona, while Othello with his violence and lack of forgiveness or acceptance drives the play further and further towards a tragedy. However, in the case of *Othello*, even the love is not enough. Othello, in the end, rejects Desdemona's efforts to save him, efforts she expends even when she can no longer save herself. This rejection is the point of no return for the characters and the genre, the action on the part of the character that makes everything irredeemable – Othello is irredeemably doomed to death, and the play is irredeemably positioned as a tragedy.

The battle between love and violence in *Othello* comes to a head in Act 5 in the final scene. Although in terms of the tragic ending of *Othello* not everything hangs on the final speech, Othello's final monologue demonstrates the title character's realization that he is in a tragedy. Having realized the full nature of what he has done, Othello takes stock of the situation and passes judgment on himself:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
 I have done the state some service, and they know't.
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
 And smote him, thus.
Stabs himself (5.2.397-417)

This speech has troubled many critics. Some find this speech the final moving note of the whole tragic ending – others disagree. F.R. Leavis found this speech an example of Othello's tendency to "sentimentalize," a tendency he thought should prevent the audience from sentimentalizing the play (151). T.S. Eliot rejects the tragic nature of the speech entirely:

What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this speech is *cheering himself up*. He is endeavoring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself. Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatising himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself. I do not believe that any writer has ever exposed this *bovarysme*, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare" (111).

While neither Eliot nor Leavis can state with certainty that Eliot was the first critic to view the speech in this light, Eliot seems very firm in his conviction that Othello's final speech does not contribute to the tragedy of the great man destroyed – if anything it detracts from it – claiming that Othello has not learned anything and remains solely concerned with his own feelings. In Eliot's view, the tragedy is that Othello never really learns about himself. Such a perspective, though, does not appear borne out by the language of the speech. Indeed, Othello's language and actions demonstrate a great deal of understanding not only of the play's tragedy but the role he himself played in the creation of that tragedy.

In this speech, Othello first recognizes that there remains a chance to save his life – or at least a chance that others will save it for him. As Harold Bloom put it, "We need to ask what

Venice would have done with Othello, had he allowed himself to survive. I venture that he seeks to forestall what might have been their politic decision: to preserve him until he might be of high use again" (474-475). The play's beginning underlines Venice's willingness to save Othello when the state chooses to forgive Othello for marrying Desdemona without her father's consent and sends him to Cyprus, effectively choosing Othello the soldier over Brabantio the Senator, because the state *needs* Othello the soldier. Othello knows, has known since before the play's beginning, that he is the best soldier Venice has to offer, that he has "done the state some service, and they know't." It would hardly be a surprise if the state spared his life – forgave his murder of his wife – for what he can render them. Othello, though, never gives the state that chance. By refusing the state an opportunity to forgive him for Desdemona's murder, Othello earns back the audience's sympathy (Bloom 475), which earns Othello back the status of a tragic figure that he would have lost had he callously moved on from his wife's murder.

Not only does Othello take responsibility for his murder, he demonstrates an understanding of what he has done in rejecting Desdemona's charity. When Othello speaks of his murder, he calls himself "one whose hand, / Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (5.2.406-408). He knows he has thrown away something of great worth: a loving wife, a good marriage, a happy ending – a romantic comedy. He continues the blame on himself, aligning himself with the enemies of the state he has spent the last decade killing, as well as a "dog." In the end, in recompense for his part in making the play a tragedy, Othello stabs himself. Of course, all of this remorse occurs after the fashion of Claudio – after he has already been assured that she died innocent. However, Othello also goes further than Claudio in atoning for his crimes.

In the end, despite the efforts or desires of the married couple, they have ended up in a tragedy. When Othello responds so violently to his suspicions about Desdemona – planning, and indeed almost completing, the double execution of his wife and his closest male friend – the pendulum swings far into the realm of tragedy, and the closest thing one can see to a happy ending after that would be a slightly lesser degree of tragedy. The level of the violence, especially Othello's, not only sets the play on the path of the tragedy, it also increases the level of charity required and utilized on the part of the other characters, especially Desdemona. Shakespeare weaves the love so finely throughout the play that even at the most horrific pass, when Othello attacks his wife in the bedroom, the audience continues to hope as Desdemona speaks to him, that she will be able to use her pure love to sway his mind and save their lives. Indeed, even after Othello has smothered his wife, Shakespeare creates a window, a very small window, in which the audience can hope for the characters' restoration through forgiveness and love. When Desdemona, Shakespeare's paragon of true love, apparently comes back from the dead like so many Shakespearean heroines and confirms for the audience her pure love for her husband, the audience experiences a small hope that maybe the couple will be able to return to the comic realm or at least a better world than the tragic one they inhabit at that point. Unfortunately, Desdemona dies immediately after, completing the destruction of the young couple necessary for a romantic and comedic resolution and destroying the hope for it in the audience. Then the audience's only hope for a less than completely tragic ending lies in the hope that Othello will use her charitable forgiveness to save himself. Had Othello seized the opportunity his wife had laid out for him, he could have demonstrated remorse and an understanding of his crimes, evidence that he had learned, had been changed by the power of Desdemona's love. However, by rejecting Desdemona's last act of love, Othello loses this

chance to save himself. Only after he has learned that she never betrayed him does Othello come to his most crucial realization: Desdemona loved him enough to forgive him the murder and to try to save his life – and he just threw this love away. This realization leads to the suicide that culminates the brutal tragedy. In *Othello*, the capacity for redemption and return to romantic comedy lies in Desdemona's capacity for charity and forgiveness. Indeed, the struggle between violence and love – the struggle that love loses – and the firm knowledge that these characters could so easily have ended in a comedy are what lends the tragedy its deep bitterness.

“Is't enough I am sorry?": Violence, Atonement, and Genre in *Cymbeline*

Cymbeline has at various points and by various critics been viewed as either an incoherent failure of a play³¹ or a poor man's *Othello*³²; however, such interpretations miss the play's true merit. Any critic who finds *Cymbeline* overly complex merely because it involves three plots – hardly a record for a Shakespeare play³³ – has not given the play sufficient thought. Critics who treat the work merely as *Othello* with a happy ending without examining the differences or their implications miss much of the play's brilliance. These critics frequently make the mistake of downgrading or overlooking the play's dissimilarities: different thematic interests and concerns; the dissimilar characters with unlike capacities to react and respond to situations; vastly unlike plots even prior to the altered outcomes. By focusing on the dissimilarities between *Cymbeline* against *Othello*, one not only appreciates their individual components more, but also gains a deeper understanding of the way that Shakespeare shapes his plays, building them through their separate components into different plays and different genres. Although *Cymbeline* stands well enough on its own not to need foils or comparisons to other works, it

³¹ Janet Adelman admits that "*Cymbeline* has seemed to many a radically incoherent play" (200). According to Judith Cook, "Posthumus [...] is, one feels, a less than bright young man" (80). Harold Bloom dubs Posthumus a "not, alas, very clever" (619) man, who is in "no way, one might think [...] salvageable, though Shakespeare insouciantly does not care" (620). Furthermore, Bloom charges that Shakespeare "redeems Posthumus at a high cost to the audience's sensibilities" (621). He also notes that Imogen could easily be mistaken for "beautiful though dumb" and some of her actions will allow the audience to "rightly decide that Shakespeare's new motto might well be 'Outrage, outrage, always give them outrage'" (618). F.R. Leavis found the play lacking in organization (176), and indeed believed that "*Cymbeline* is not a great work of art of the order of *The Winter's Tale*" (174).

As William Barry Thorne remarks, "Because it does not fit easily into conventional generalizations about the nature of the late plays, some critics feel that it does not belong to its sequence, is 'out of place', 'clumsy', 'a misguided and unsuccessful attempt at a new form'; others feel that it was spawned beyond the pale, the illegitimate progeny of a dramatist too tired and bored to care about the future of the fledgling introduced upon the boards" (144).

³² As Quiller-Couch puts it, "when we start picking *Cymbeline* to pieces, we soon find ourselves puzzled, disheartened; as though at stand, in a cathedral of glorious windows, before an empty one demanding to be glorious as they, and -- for material -- at stand before a scrap-heap of rejected glass. *Cymbeline* is Lear, but an inferior Lear; Iachimo is Iago, but an inferior Iago, a professional excuse. [...] Posthumus is a weak *Othello*" (246). To Lynda Boose, the name Iachimo sounds like it means "little Iago" (59), and she also points out that both men steal a "trifle" to show the deceived husbands (59).

³³ Other Shakespeare plays with three or more plots that are not generally perceived as overly complex include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and *1 Henry IV*.

gains, not loses, interest and relevance in the canon when standing side by side with Shakespeare's other works, especially when examining issues such as genre and outcome.

To examine the difference in genre and outcome, one must begin with the misconception that *Cymbeline* represents simply a rehashing of *Othello*. Though one cannot deny that *Cymbeline* involves the use of tropes that Shakespeare has employed or relied on in his prior works³⁴, Shakespeare did not simply recycle one play and magically create a new ending, this time one resembling Happily Ever After. In order to organically create a new outcome to his story, Shakespeare needed to create and assemble new and unlike characters and component parts and to allow events to transpire differently. Among other alterations, Shakespeare has built himself vaguely similar yet quite dissimilar lovers for his leading couple, which contributes strongly to a different result.

Imogen, for example, is *not* Desdemona and therefore cannot be expected to fulfill Desdemona's role in shaping the play's outcome. While a loving, caring, and dedicated character³⁵, Imogen does not perform the role of angel or boundlessly forgiving wife. In the first

³⁴ Those looking closely for reused tropes might notice a reasonable amount of *Othello*, but also some *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Winter's Tale*, and *Merry Wives of Windsor*, not to mention smatterings of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Lear*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Comedy of Errors*.

³⁵ Many critics, even those who do not fully like the play, consider Imogen a paragon. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch joins Swinburne in ranking her ahead of any women in any work of literature: "Though Perdita may be the sweetest of all imaginable maidens, Imogen is the most adorable woman ever created by God or man" (Quiller-Couch 243). That might be the highest praise any reader has ever given any character in any work of fiction anywhere, ever. He further identifies her as a recognizably – presumably by everyone – ideal woman: "A lady, wronged but forgiving, in whom his audience might recognize, or believe that they recognized, the completest of her sex" (Quiller-Couch 245). Indeed, he calls her Shakespeare's best woman: "The sum and aggregate of fair womanhood as at last Shakespeare *achieved* it" (Quiller-Couch 244). He specifically calls her a better version of Shakespeare's Desdemona: "Imogen is the be-all and end-all of the play. She has all the wrongs of Desdemona, *plus* the serene courage to conquer them and forgive them. She has all the fond trust of Desdemona, with all the steel and wit which Desdemona fatally lacks" (Quiller-Couch 242-243). Quiller-Couch's views on the good of Imogen do not reflect a fanatic adoration of *Cymbeline* as a play; indeed, he considers Imogen to be the work's chief redemption: "The worth of every detail consists in just so much as it contributes -- no matter how modestly -- to the total effect [...] Why on earth should it be a reproach against *Cymbeline* that in *Lear* Shakespeare did something better than *this*, in *Othello* something better than *that*, when out of the inferior *this* and *that* he has built the incomparable Imogen?" (Quiller-Couch 247). Although he does not think *Cymbeline* a particularly brilliant play – he evidently falls under the category of individuals who believe it to be a lesser work – Quiller-Couch does acknowledge that Imogen does not represent the mere recycling of prior material. As much as she might be "out of the inferior this or

place, Imogen is not made of softness and love the way that Desdemona is. Those comments are not to say that Desdemona lacks all spine but rather to say that where Desdemona practices unswerving love and forgiveness, Imogen practices tough love, sweet but steely. A.C. Bradley juxtaposes Imogen and Desdemona and finds that Desdemona “seems to lack that independence and strength of spirit” of Imogen (34). One could disagree with that view or with Quiller-Couch’s assertion that Desdemona lacks “serene courage” and “steel and wit,” but one cannot dispute that Imogen certainly possesses these qualities (242-243). Furthermore, Imogen never shrinks from asserting her position and her feelings: “Imogen is extraordinarily forceful in defining herself and her relationship to father and husband” (Adelman 209). True, Desdemona does defend her relationship with Othello before the Senate; however, Imogen not only defends the relationship publicly once with her husband by, but also defends it every day against the impugning and assaults of Cloten, who tries after her husband’s banishment to force her to marry him. Therefore, Imogen must be *more* forceful and for *longer*. These critics can see that Imogen shows herself, in some ways, a harder, if not hardened, Desdemona. This toughness matters, as Imogen relies on this internal strength to get her through her father’s banishment of her husband, her husband’s betrayal, a trip to Wales, and a war unscathed and determined on her future; it also prevents her from absorbing all of the burden to herself and helps force Posthumus to play his part in saving their relationships. Without her internal strength, the play could not play out as it does.

that,” he also terms her “incomparable.” Many more recent critics and readers of the play would doubtless take issue with the language that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch uses to discuss Imogen. Quiller-Couch, who wrote published in 1918, focuses a great deal on her womanhood, treating that as one of the most important descriptors of her character and using his ideal of womanhood as opposed to personhood or adulthood as the yardstick by which to judge her. Yet by those standards and a number of others, Imogen would be everything one ever wanted – and found – in Desdemona and a little something more.

her choice of spouse will drive him to an early grave, actually *killing* him: “O disloyal thing / That shouldst repair my youth, thou heap'st / A year's age on me.” However, Imogen is not having any of this nonsense. When her father interrupts her defense of Posthumus with an insult – “O thou vile one” – Imogen immediately reclaims control of the conversation, indeed re-seizes control of the verse line, to refute his claim. Not only does she defend her choice as a worthy one, as Desdemona does, she actually succeeds in turning her father's accusations back against him, pointing out that this union is, at heart, *his* fault. He selected Posthumus and “bred him as [her] playfellow”, created such a worthy gentleman to be her husband, made him “a man worth any woman”; she merely noticed the man's worth and acted accordingly. Imogen, furthermore, does not share Desdemona's concern that her words will upset her father. She does not aim for a love that “behaveth itself unseemly,” but she does not exempt her father from the people against whom she will defend that love. Imogen's strength means she does not take attacks from anyone.

Imogen's steel pervades not only her actions but also her reactions. The audience sees the uppermost example of Imogen's strength over Desdemona's sweetness in Imogen's response to the news of her husband's suspicions about her chastity and his intention to kill her: Imogen's reaction holds little instantaneous acceptance or forgiveness. Indeed, when first she reads his accusations against her, she responds not with self-defense but with a turnabout accusation:

I false! Thy conscience witness: Iachimo,
 Thou didst accuse him of incontinency;
 Thou then look'dst like a villain; now methinks
 Thy favour's good enough. Some jay of Italy
 Whose mother was her painting, hath betray'd him:
 Poor I am stale, a garment out of fashion;
 And, for I am richer than to hang by the walls,
 I must be ripp'd: – to pieces with me! – O,
 Men's vows are women's traitors! All good seeming,
 By thy revolt, O husband, shall be thought
 Put on for villainy; not born where't grows,
 But worn a bait for ladies. (3.4.48-59).

Whether or not one considers turnabout fair play, and whether or not one believes Imogen's assumptions about Posthumus at this moment were fair, one cannot deny that Desdemona would *never* make this assumption about Othello. Indeed, as Linda Bamber points out, *none* of Shakespeare's other slandered wives make such an accusation (180). One cannot even picture Desdemona – the one who cannot speak the word 'whore' or imagine that a wife would ever betray her husband sexually – *thinking* such a thing about her spouse. Yet Imogen for all her love, her fidelity, and her chastity, not only has no trouble imaging that "men's vows are women's traitors," but actually accusing him aloud of inconstancy and an indiscretion or affair with "some jay of Italy/ whose mother was her painting." She even goes so far as to say that he has taught her that men are not what they seem, that "all good seeming" has been "put on for villainy," nothing more than "a bait for ladies." Indeed, one senses in her remarks an equating of the men whose good seeming serves as "a bait for ladies" and the women who paint their faces, as if to say that they are both wearing a disguise to ensnare the sexual interest and maybe the monetary support of their lovers. Certainly, considering the class difference between herself and her partner, there are some less than surprising concerns about what it could mean about the fact that he is not the man she thought she married. When she reacts to his accusations, Imogen classes her untrusting husband with the Italian prostitutes. Imogen in her outrage does not scruple to suspect that Posthumus broke his oaths with her³⁷.

Furthermore, Imogen's reaction represents the opposite of a nature that "thinketh no evil." She certainly thought plenty of admittedly deserved evil about Iachimo, saying he "then look'dst like a villain," and only pardons him when he has been exonerated in her eyes by what she considers proof that Posthumus is, in fact, inconstant. Additionally, her willingness to suspect

³⁷ Though she obviously swore some sort of fidelity in her marriage vows, it is Posthumus who re-vows devotion during their separation in the presence of the audience: "I will remain / The loyal'st husband that did e'er plight troth" (1.1.110-111). This promise does not prevent Imogen's suspecting him of disloyalty.

her husband in turn of infidelity clearly does not indicate a relationship based on mutual trust, let alone a love that “is kind,” “is not easily provoked,” and “thinketh no evil.” Because Imogen’s love does not extend to boundless forgiveness, Imogen will not be seeking Posthumus out to explain to him the error of his ways or to save their marriage herself. That reaction, as will be discussed later, means that the burden will rest on her husband to save their marriage.

One should also note that Imogen’s sense of self-worth has in no way suffered from Posthumus’ comments about her virtue, demonstrating the strength at her core that does not break. Although she thinks that he has lost interest in her, finding her “stale” and “out of fashion,” she does not take that view to heart. Indeed, she takes a great deal of exception to it. She holds onto sense of her worth and onto the place in society to which she has been born. These are things his aggressions cannot take away from her. When Posthumus calls for her murder, she blames and invokes their social distinctions and her own quality: “for I am richer than to hang by the walls, / I must be ripp’d:--to pieces with me.” She knows that her marriage did not change her royal lineage and that therefore Posthumus cannot simply walk away from their union. Furthermore, one gets the sense from Imogen that had they been having this confrontation face to face, she would not have allowed him just to walk away from her. He would have actually had to tear her to pieces³⁸, because she would not simply stand by and allow him to destroy their marriage. She might not travel to Rome to confront him in person; however, she does not quietly accept his choice. She holds herself strong and sure in the face of tremendous strain, even if she has to hold onto her anger to do it.

³⁸ One can hear in her language, the idea that she would be torn to pieces, an understanding of the violence at hand. One almost imagines that she heard her husband’s threat to “tear her limb-meal.” Unlike Desdemona, who bears her husband’s violence while asserting that she did not deserve the attack, Imogen also calls him on his violence, giving the sense that she sees the violence not only as undeserved but just plain wrong.

I grieve myself

To think, when thou shalt be disedged by her
That now thou tirest on, how thy memory
Will then be pang'd by me. Prithee, dispatch:
The lamb entreats the butcher: where's thy knife?
Thou art too slow to do thy master's bidding,
When I desire it too. (3.4.67-75,83-94,100-106).

Imogen's impulse and willingness to commit suicide – even to the point of drawing the sword herself – shows her love to be almost the opposite of one that “Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” Now that she has lost her husband, she actually seems to give up, as if she has lost all will to carry on, since “The innocent mansion of [her] love, [her] heart; / [...] 'tis empty of all things but grief.” While she does acknowledge that there is “against self” slaughter/ There is a prohibition so divine” it “cravens [her] weak hand” she does not let that stop her. Her inner-strength helps drive her to the end she has begun to embrace.

Indeed, when she discovers “the scriptures of loyal Leonatus/ All turn’d to heresey,” her religious objections to suicide come apart. From the sound of things, her heart will soon “feel the treason sharply.” Surprisingly enough, somehow, despite her grief and her new desire to die, Imogen finds something in her grief-ridden heart to spare for Posthumus. She does express a concern for the pain he will feel when he “shalt be disedged by her/ That now [he] tirest on” and she trusts that he will then remember her and that he will regret his actions. Though these thoughts smack a little bit of the vengeful “and then he’ll be sorry!” one also finds a genuine concern for the pain he will suffer – and indeed does suffer – when he realizes what he has done. From all appearances, she loves Posthumus, but, when pressed to a breaking point, she has to struggle with it. Furthermore, when given time to contemplate the faults of her husband, Imogen does not, as Desdemona does, hold onto the firm conviction that her husband loves her and would never seriously hurt her, possibly because, unlike Desdemona’s spouse, Imogen’s husband escalated immediately to murder. Some readers might be disturbed by the fact that Imogen’s desire to commit suicide seems tied to the idea that Posthumus wishes her to die. After all, she does bid Pisanio to “a little witness [her] obedience” before she draws the blade herself. However, considering how much of her world appears to be crumbling, it seems more like she has just considered taking his suggestion rather than taking his orders. Imogen’s love does not follow Desdemona’s in patience or meekness; rather, in the face of complex issues, it produces a more complex response.

In the second place, Imogen does not share Desdemona’s drive to forgive her husband, which shifts the burden of saving their relationship and atoning for the crimes over to Posthumus. Even as she journeys into Wales, Imogen does not suddenly become overburdened with the desire to forgive or redeem her husband. Instead, she accepts his sins against her and instead of

seeking to repair their marriage, she seeks to make her peace with a world in which feels different, in a world in which they are no longer together. When she meets her brothers, she reflects that, as she can no longer have a good life with her husband, she would desire to make a life with them:

Pardon me, gods!
I'd change my sex to be companion with them,
Since Leonatus's false. (3.6.104-106)

She does not wholly wish to abandon her husband, but Imogen's mind is not so forgiving that she can forget that Leonatus has showed himself "false." This reaction hardly has the flavor of a love that "never faileth." However, she does not allow the unpleasant realization to destroy her, and she shows herself capable of contemplating a future with the brothers, though it would be complicated by her sex. Imogen's reaction to Posthumus' betrayal of the marriage is not forgiveness but anger, disapproval, and redirection³⁹.

Of course, in the end, Imogen does decide to forgive her husband for his accusations and even for the attempt on her life – only *after* he has proven himself very, very sorry and actually worthy of being forgiven. The first glimpse of Imogen's forgiveness comes at Posthumus' supposed funeral when she finds his body at Milford Haven⁴⁰. When Imogen believes that her

³⁹ Those who find Imogen's initial response too harsh or unforgiving, especially compared to Desdemona's boundless forgiveness, must consider that Posthumus commits a somewhat different offense than Othello does. The actions of Othello and Posthumus are not immediately and exactly comparable, nor are their relationships. As A.C. Bradley points out, Othello did not know his wife "like his sister or his bosom-friend" and that nothing about Othello's character would lead one to believe that if he had had that knowledge "he would have felt and acted as he does in the play," (Bradley 29). However, Posthumus can offer no such defense of uncertainty or unknowing. As Imogen herself points out, Posthumus had been her father's ward and had been bred as her playfellow. Imogen could fairly assume that the man who had known her from her childhood would have a firmer basis for his love and an honest belief in her goodness and her fidelity, and therefore she arguably more than Desdemona has a right to anger and umbrage from her husband's suspicions. She had every right to expect a love that "Doth not behave itself unseemly, [...] is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil," which is not what Posthumus shows her in his suspicions.

⁴⁰ The issue never truly gets addressed in the text, except Imogen's concern that Pisanio's letter might have been forged (4.2.391), of why Posthumus might be in Milford Haven at that moment. One, it seems, will be left to assume that Posthumus would have had to come to see Imogen. Therefore, Imogen has some reason to think, since Posthumus has come to Milford Haven, as she had been led to believe he would, that he had not betrayed her as much as she had thought he had.

husband has died, she mourns deeply and finally begins to forgive her husband. Despite everything that he has done to her and everything that she has had to give up for or because of him, Imogen can find it in her heart to mourn his death piteously:

This is Pisanio's deed, and Cloten's: O!
Give colour to my pale cheek with thy blood,
That we the horrid may seem to those
Which chance to find us: O, my lord, my lord! (4.2.401-405).

The image, coating herself with his blood, may seem disturbing, but her words also show that she thinks only to be seen by “those/ Which chance to find [them],” indicating her intention to stay by the body and mourn her husband further⁴¹. She exclaims repeatedly over the body she thinks belongs to her husband, crying for him. As she mourns, the audience starts to see that her love “is kind” and forgiving. When the Romans find her with the corpse, they say that her actions truly earned her the title of Fidele (4.2.462-263). Although some might question the fact that her love appears most strongly when she believes that she has lost him, Imogen’s capacity to mourn her supposed loss indicates importantly that she has let go of the anger that characterized her initial response to her husband’s accusations. As she mourns, she does not mention or hold against him his suspicions about her or the suspicions that she had had about him. She never treats his death as his just deserts for his insults to her, nor does one see any glorying or vengefulness in her. The letting go of her anger, her willingness to forgive him for his mistakes, in much the same way he resolves to forgive her hers, clears the way for her to accept him again as her husband and cement their happy ending.

⁴¹ Some readers will see Imogen’s mourning a parallel to Claudio’s mourning of Hero in *Much Ado*. Claudio mourns for the night before leaving to keep a promise to marry Hero’s cousin – who turns out to be Hero – but he also states an intention to return yearly to repeat his mourning ritual, indicating that he shall continue to mourn and remember her in private and in public for years to come. Imogen, as well, shows an desire to keep her love alive and present through her mourning, intending, apparently, never to leave the body. The willingness and ability to mourn a lost lover demonstrates not only adoration but also devotion, even in the absence of a beloved.

In the final scene, when Imogen and Posthumus are reunited, she tells him she will not be so easily thrown away next time:

IMOGEN: Why did you throw your wedded lady from you?
 Think that you are upon a rock; and now
 Throw me again. *Embracing him*
 POSTHUMUS LEONATUS: Hang there like a fruit, my soul,
 Till the tree die! (5.5310-314)

She does not meekly accept his admissions and apologies, the way one might imagine Desdemona would if Othello had managed to apologize. In Imogen's "think that you are upon a rock and now/ Throw me again," one can practically hear a "just you try." She has him back, and she has *decided* to keep him, and she will not be going *anywhere*. From now on, her love shall "believ[e] all things" and "hop[e] all things," and it shall not let him slip again. Although Imogen does eventually exercise some mercy, forgiveness, and charity in her relationship with her husband, Imogen does it in her own assertive manner, simultaneously forgiving him his offenses against her and staking a claim to him for the rest of their future.

All of these inconsistencies between Imogen and Desdemona, between their marital practices, no matter how small they might appear, matter. Imogen has less willingness to accept grief from others and less of a desire assume that her partner will always act for the best without her help. In *Othello*, Desdemona bears the brunt of the struggle to save their marriage, as Othello himself has gone too far down his path to save the marriage, not unless she pulls him back. However, Imogen, being so different from Desdemona, will not willingly endure such a burden to save her marriage. She does not have Desdemona's willingness to go after her husband and save him from herself. Instead, that obligation will have to fall to someone else in this particular play.

A reader cannot forget, though, that just as Imogen is no Desdemona, Posthumus is no Othello either. Some critics, such as F.R. Leavis, see these men as very similar; however, such a focus on similarities often highlights the wrong traits and ignores critical distinctions:

Posthumus' case actually answers to the conventional account of Othello's: the noble hero, by nature far from jealous, is worked on and betrayed by devilish Italian cunning – Iachimo is, quite simply, the efficient cause that Iago, in the sentimentalized misreading of *Othello*, is seen as being. Posthumus suffers remorse for his murderous revulsion, but we are not to consider him degraded by his jealousy, or seriously blamable. Simply, he is a victim. [...]Shakespeare [...] has taken over a romantic convention and has done little to give it anything other than a romantic signification. (Leavis 177).

Though Leavis at this moment appears to be defending *Cymbeline*, he actually allows his preconceived ideas about both works to temper his understanding of the differences between these two dissimilar characters who are faced with a similar difficulty. By choosing to believe that the only real difference must be the extent to which either man remains susceptible to jealousy, Leavis overlooks a depth and distinction in Posthumus. Both men are victims of many situations, and both men are “seriously blamable,” but saying only that about either character reduces both a great deal. Though they are both trained in combat and men exposed to jealousy, their situations are not identical, nor are their responses. In the end, these dissimilarities will play a role in shaping the play's outcome.

Firstly, one cannot forget that unlike Othello, Posthumus does not have independent standing in his homeland – he derives all of his standing from his relationship with his wife and others value him chiefly as she values him. Indeed, almost the first that the audience hears of Posthumus comes from a lord who esteems Posthumus – and encourages another lord to esteem him so – largely on the grounds of his marriage:

To his mistress,
For whom he now is banish'd, her own price
Proclaims how she esteem'd him and his virtue;
By her election may be truly read

What kind of man he is. (1.1.56-60).

He will be cast in his society less by his own merits than by “her election” and the manner in which “she esteem’d him and his virtue.” Indeed, these lords have no interest in looking deeper into Posthumus. They will decide “what kind of man he is” based on Imogen’s opinion, almost like whoever Posthumus truly is or has been prior to his marriage will be of no consequence to his those with whom he lives. It does not help that, being posthumously born and reared up by Imogen’s father, Posthumus has no family standing:

Deprived at birth of the familial identifiers that would locate him, psychologically and socially, Posthumus defines himself and is defined by others largely by Imogen's choice of him. [...] She can make or unmake him: radically deprived of family, dependent on her love for his position, he has no secure self; he cannot return any gift that is worth what he has received. (Adelman 208).

Posthumus’ lack of a “secure self” will remain a difficulty not easy for his character to overcome, one with which he will struggle for much of the play. Even though one might think that in the British aristocratic system Posthumus might be allowed to claim his position by blood, no one seems inclined to offer him such status. Posthumus owes nothing he is to his status as one of the Leonati and everything to his status as Imogen’s chosen spouse. Not until late in the play, when he fights in the war, does Posthumus earn any glory or honor through his own merit:

Posthumus’ decision to fight in disguise against the part he comes with is initially defined as one of his rites of penitence[...]; but the disguise itself is designed to show him forth as one of the Leonati, worthy through his manliness to be his father's son[...]. Fighting unknown, he can establish a secure masculine identity in no way indebted to Imogen's choice of him, dependent rather on his status as heroic warrior and his alliance with a series of patriarchal families.(Adelman 217).

However, even at this moment, when he shows himself “one of the Leonati,” he fights in disguise, and so his merit is demonstrated only to the audience and not to his wife’s people, let

alone her father. This victory, then, is only for him, and maybe the reader and viewer⁴².

Although one might have hoped that Posthumus would enter his marriage a self-secure person, evidently he as much as the audience needs the play's events to establish for himself and the court his worth separate from his wife.

Unlike Othello, Posthumus does not begin the play with a reputation for military glory and success. This absence means that not only must he set great store by his relationship with his wife – as one cannot deny that Othello does – and feel the pain when he feels his marriage has been destroyed by adultery – as one cannot deny that Othello does – it also means that when he has lost Imogen, Posthumus has *nothing* to fall back on. Although Othello thinks he has lost his occupation and self from the supposed Desdemona affair, Posthumus actually *has* lost his world. Othello, unlike Posthumus, still had at least one source of what Adelman called his “secure self” left, where Posthumus had none. Othello, after the murder, will still have his career and the possibility of returning to Venice. Posthumus, after the murder, will have damaged his relationship with Pisanio, will have no occupation, and will still never be able to return to Britain. This nothingness awaiting Posthumus lends a different emotional tenor to Posthumus’ decision to murder his wife and his later regret for his actions. He does not kill her to fix himself and regain his control of the world– he kills her to stop the internal bleeding. In a unique way, Posthumus *needs* Imogen more and will *miss* Imogen more.

Furthermore, while Posthumus understands and expresses both violence and anger, one does not get the sense that he has the military training and experience to remain cool under pressure, to plan and execute an attack, to live with the ramifications of bloodshed, that Othello does. When Iachimo casts aspersions on Imogen’s chastity, he manages to work Posthumus up

⁴² Then again, he does need that help with some viewers, such as Harold Bloom, who wonders at the marriage until he considers the rest of the cast: “What Imogen finds in Posthumus we are not shown, but if Cloten (rhyming with ‘rotten’) is the alternative, that tells us enough” (Bloom 621).

sufficiently that Posthumus not only wagers on his wife's honor⁴³ but also promises to revenge the insult with his sword⁴⁴:

I embrace these conditions; let us have articles betwixt us. Only, thus far you shall answer: if you make your voyage upon her and give me directly to understand you have prevailed, I am no further your enemy; she is not worth our debate: if she remain unseduced, you not making it appear otherwise, for your ill opinion and the assault you have made to her chastity you shall answer me with your sword. (1.5.166-172)

Although he claims that if his wife betrays him with Iachimo, the man may be “no further [his] enemy” as she would then be “not worth [their] debate,” that promise does not seem like one he can keep. Especially, since he follows the promise with a threat to “answer [him] with [his] sword,” and especially since this whole bet arises in an argument in which Posthumus clearly lost control. Indeed, it proves difficult to claim that Posthumus has any emotional control upon discovering the supposed affair, considering his immediate explosion:

she hath bought the name of whore thus dearly.
There, take thy hire; and all the fiends of hell
Divide themselves between you!” (2.4.160-164).

In his immediate response to the idea that his wife has betrayed him, Posthumus damns his wife and a male acquaintance to all the tortures of hell. This anger hardly strikes as being “no further [Iachimo's] enemy.” He does not have the control to hold to that conviction. Furthermore, his

⁴³ While many critics take exception at Posthumus' willingness to wager at *all* on his wife's chastity, one could argue that refusal to wager, now that Iachimo has backed him into such a corner, would rather imply that Posthumus actually has no faith in his wife's fidelity and believes that he would lose the bet. After all, as Iachimo says, “You are afraid, and therein the wiser. If you buy ladies' flesh at a million a dram, you cannot preserve it from tainting: but I see you have some religion in you, that you fear” (1.4.142-145). Posthumus must struggle for his belief in his wife, being surrounded on all sides by men who believe women are inconstant and unfaithful. Iachimo calls doubting women a sort of religion and Posthumus' own father-in-law says of Imogen to Cloten, “The exile of her minion is too new; / She hath not yet forgot him: some more time / Must wear the print of his remembrance out, / And then she's yours.” (2.3.43-46). By believing that his wife would pass the test implied in the wager, Posthumus demonstrate more faith in Imogen than one sees in any other man in *Cymbeline*.

⁴⁴ One learns early on that Posthumus must have some skill with a blade, as it is reported that he bested Cloten handily in a duel before his departure: ‘my master rather play'd than fought / And had no help of anger: they were parted / By gentlemen at hand. (1.1.201-204). Without emotion to drive him or distract him, Posthumus can clearly hold off an opponent without trouble, though given that the enemy in this example is Cloten, the enemy was doubtless none too skilled, poised, or reasoned. Still, Posthumus' survival of the war in the play's end, in a battle where he looked to die, and his saving the king, demonstrate as certain level of skill in combat. However, skill at swordplay demonstrates neither combat experience or skill in controlling and marshaling emotion.

aggression does not demonstrate a love that “doth not behave itself unseemly [...], is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.” His emotions fly further outside his control, to an extent recognizable to his compatriots:

POSTHUMUS LEONATUS: No swearing.
 If you will swear you have not done't, you lie;
 And I will kill thee, if thou dost deny
 Thou'st made me cuckold.
 IACHIMO: I'll deny nothing.
 POSTHUMUS LEONATUS: O, that I had her here, to tear her limb-meal!
 I will go there and do't, i' the court, before
 Her father. I'll do something—*Exit*
 PHILARIO: Quite besides
 The government of patience! You have won:
 Let's follow him, and pervert the present wrath
 He hath against himself. (2.4.184-194).

Posthumus has become so deeply convinced that his wife has betrayed him that he actually promises to *kill* the man who might tell him that she did not, even though such a denial of the affair would be the truth, which could be borne out by Iachimo and Imogen. Furthermore, when Iachimo does not deny the affair, Posthumus declares an intention to murder his wife, indeed to do so violently, “to tear her limb-meal,” and in fact to “do't, i' the court, before/ Her father.” Evidently, at this moment, rationality or self-control has entirely deserted him. One should note that in his anger Posthumus forgets to consider that both the return and the murder would cost his life. Furthermore, he has crossed beyond the bounds love should constrain, and his love does not, at this point, “beareth all things [...] endureth all things.” Were there any reason to doubt that he had already lost control, one can see the loss of control in Philario's concern over “the present wrath / He hath against himself.” Philario has become concerned not only that Posthumus is in a great deal of pain but also that this pain will result in violence, even against himself. For all that anyone could say about Posthumus having experience with hand-to-hand combat or weaponry, the evidence one sees about his personality indicates that he does not

have the requisite training and experience to handle carefully planning and executing an act of violence, let alone the emotional ramifications of such an action.

When it comes to the violence, the greatest dissimilarity between Posthumus and Othello comes in how their acts of violence are performed. Although both men desire their wives to die for their adultery, they go about securing this end differently. Othello sets about the murder himself, smothering his wife on their marital bed. Posthumus, being an exile and lacking the will and force to return to his home country to commit the murder himself – something Posthumus only ever talks of doing, and something one might guess Othello capable of – dispatches a friend to commit the murder for him:

That part thou, Pisanio, must act for me, if thy faith be not tainted with the breach of hers. Let thine own hands take away her life: I shall give thee opportunity at Milford-Haven. She hath my letter for the purpose where, if thou fear to strike and to make me certain it is done, thou art the pander to her dishonour and equally to me disloyal. (3.4.27-33).

Despite his anger and deep issues of mistrust, Posthumus separates himself enough from his bloodlust to enlist the assistance of a male compatriot⁴⁵ in the murder of his wife: “That part thou, Pisanio, must act for me, if thy faith be not tainted with the breach of hers. Let thine own hands take away her life.” He does not wholly distance himself from the act, as the murder would be at his request and as he takes it upon himself to make the plans, to “give [Pisanio] opportunity at Milford-Haven;” however, he does abandon his original intention to destroy her in person, separating himself from the actual act of violence. Posthumus’ willingness to separate himself from the act of violence performs several functions. Firstly, it separates him from his act of vengeance, displacing some of the sin. Posthumus does not exempt himself entirely from blame

⁴⁵ One should note that Posthumus’ loss of faith in Imogen has shattered all of his faith in others, destroying the one other relationship in his life that should have been based on mutual trust – that with Pisanio: “if thy faith be not tainted with the breach of hers.” Posthumus has become so estranged from love and trust that he actually suspects that his bodyman – the only friend the audience ever knows him to have – might have also had sexual congress with Posthumus’ wife.

by including Pisanio, but it does ensure that he does not become wholly responsible for the act. It keeps the blood from being solely on his own hands. By asking for the support of another male, Posthumus seeks the same protection as Claudio, who also acted in concert with a friend. Secondly, Posthumus' inclusion of Pisanio provides a second voice in the act, one who can, and in this case *does*, look at the act of vengeance objectively and keep justice from being perverted in such a way. Thus, Posthumus is saved by his choice to seek third-party assistance in the attack. One might also note that in a certain sense, Posthumus' bringing in a compatriot to assist him in his revenge-justice represents a more Christian act, something that would have been important and meaningful to Shakespeare's original audiences and some modern audiences:

Martin Luther mentions one such exception: 'A Christian should be so disposed that he will suffer every evil and injustice without avenging himself On behalf of others, however, he may and should seek vengeance, justice, protection, and help. ... [W]hen [Christians] perform their duties, not with the intention of seeking their own ends but only of helping the law and the governing authority function to coerce the wicked, there is no peril in that. (Tassi 49).

According to Martin Luther, a Christian should not seek vengeance for oneself, as Othello does; however, a Christian may seek vengeance on behalf of another where his or her own best interests are not a factor, as Posthumus asks Pisanio to do. Therefore, some might argue that Posthumus pursues a slightly more "christian" version of Othello's actions. Whether or not one believes that the act was less vengeful for involving a second, one cannot deny that Posthumus' decision to bring in Pisanio does affect the effects of his desire for his wife's blood. Posthumus' desire and willingness to separate himself from the violence ends up reducing the amount of violence and the level of violence. The reduced violence diminishes the number of crimes for which Posthumus needs atone, facilitating the shift towards the comic outcome.

Arguably, the largest difference between Posthumus and Othello, Claudio, or any other man in Shakespeare's work who believes that his wife has been unfaithful to him comes in the

fact that Posthumus actually *forgives* Imogen for the affair – he forgives her after he believes her dead but *before* he has any reason to suspect that he has been duped – and declares that this infidelity would have been an offense that they could have worked through in their relationship. This aberration from the usual standard of Shakespeare's becomes *key* in not only the distinction between this play and *Othello* and *Much Ado* but also the alteration in the nature and outcome of the play. This forgiveness makes him exceptional in the canon: "Posthumus recovers his sense of Imogen's worth not – like Othello or Claudio or Leontes – after he has become convinced of her chastity, but before" (Adelman 208). Posthumus finds it in himself to forgive, to love, and to value his wife even after he believes that she has betrayed him and their marriage. Unlike other men in his situation, Posthumus comes to regret his violence, not because he realizes that he threw away something that actually has value to him⁴⁶, but because he manages to put her supposed indiscretion in some sort of perspective and realize he still values her: "how many/ Must murder wives much better than themselves /For wrying but a little!" (5.1.3-5). Looking at their marriage in a larger sense, Posthumus recognizes that his wife had still been a good and virtuous woman, the woman that he married, and recognizes that he himself has been less than perfect in the past and likely will again prove so in the future. Knowing this about her and himself, Posthumus manages to admit that maybe in the grand scheme of things one infidelity might actually be "wrying but a little." Indeed, he says that she could still have been better than him, still continued his better half, "much better than [himself]". Posthumus makes a meaningful choice of words. The term "wrying" denotes deviating, straying, turning from a course. He admits that Imogen has strayed from the intended course of a married woman, fidelity to her husband; however, he admits that it had been a mistake on her part and does not treat it as a

⁴⁶ Othello does value Desdemona in her pure form, even more than a "world/ Of one entire and Perfect chrysolite" (5.2.175-176). Indeed, when he discovers what he has done, he equates it to throwing a priceless pearl (5.2.407).

crime or a damning sin. In this forgiveness, the audience sees glimpses of a love that “suffereth long, and is kind,” that “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth,” that “hopeth all things.” Posthumus has moved away from his love at the beginning, a love for a paragon, and begun to embrace a more human love, one which accepts weakness and failings, a love which has room for human life, a love which can save him and his wife.

This unique display of forgiveness leaves a funny taste in the mouth of some critics. Janet Adelman appears amazed and almost disbelieving when the “supposed adultery is astonishingly dismissed as 'wrying but a little'" (Adelman 199). One could be surprised that she finds forgiveness and progress in a marriage “astonishing,” except that such acceptance in her mind is “rare among Shakespeare's heroes" (208). She might not be wrong to think such behavior rare, but calling Posthumus’ forgiveness of his wife a dismissal of the incident downplays the character’s tremendous achievement. Adelman responds to a rare occurrence not as if it were impressive but as if it were impossible. Harold Bloom shows even less interest in Posthumus’ redemption through honorable forgiveness:

His repentance is in dubious taste, since he continues to believe that his wife betrayed him with Iachimo, but that supposed crime, once so hellish, is now 'wrying but a little' and a 'little fault.' The wonder again is why Shakespeare so consistently labors to make Posthumus so dubious a protagonist, so estranged from the audience that we simply cannot welcome his final reunion with Imogen. It grates us to hear that the gods should have saved Imogen, so that she could repent. (632).

Bloom finds it in “dubious taste” that Posthumus would go so far as to forgive this woman he believes has harmed him, somehow managing to overlook that one only ever needs to forgive people who have harmed one. If Posthumus truly believed that Imogen had never done him wrong, had not “wry[ed] a little,” had not committed a “little fault,” then he would not need to forgive *her* – he would need to track her down to ask her forgiveness for *him*. Furthermore, when Bloom complains “it grates us to hear that the gods should have saved Imogen, so that she

could repent,” one can see that he has decided to *overlook* the fact that Posthumus has no reason to spontaneously decide that he has been deceived. He has no new information, and even his most trusted friend, Pisanio, sent only confirmation of Imogen’s death, no defense of the girl. The most surprising result would be Posthumus suddenly believing her innocent. Instead, Posthumus does the kindest thing he can do, believe that she hurt him but love her anyway. As for Bloom’s assertion that this forgiveness makes Posthumus “so dubious a protagonist, so estranged from the audience that we simply cannot welcome his final reunion with Imogen,” that reaction just seems small-minded or even mean-spirited. In choosing to be overly surprised or even angered by Posthumus’ acceptance of his wife’s supposed errors, these critics overlook emotional logic, as well as what makes this moment exceptional and great, and they manage to completely miss the point.

Having set himself apart in such a critical way – admitting that he was wrong, if not about the suspicion then about his reaction – Posthumus sets about ensuring his own chance at a comedy’s ending through a means both obvious and remarkable – atonement. Posthumus returns to Imogen’s homeland on a suicide mission to purge his sin before he dies. Having realized that he executed his wife unjustly, Posthumus realizes that he must pay for depriving the world of her goodness:

The temple
Of virtue was she; yea, and she herself.
Spit, and throw stones, cast mire upon me, set
The dogs o' the street to bay me: every villain
Be call'd Posthumus Leonatus; and
Be villany less than 'twas! O Imogen!
My queen, my life, my wife! O Imogen,
Imogen, Imogen! (5.5.257-264).

Although it is not until late in the play that Posthumus realizes that Imogen really was a “temple/Of Virtue,” Posthumus does not shield himself by pointing out that he had been taken in, instead

stating that he deserves punishment also for allowing himself to be led astray. He invites the punishments of himself, his gods, and their people. The play certainly bears him out on the need to redeem himself and allowing him ample opportunity to do so. One critic, Carol Thomas Neely, points out that Shakespeare preserves Posthumus to fully atone for his offenses:

Posthumus, however, is given every opportunity [...] to do penance, to reform and be forgiven. His character is protected by his doubles, Cloten and Iachimo, who express aggression and sexual degradation in more extreme and pernicious forms than he does. [...] They make Posthumus' misogyny in his diatribe against 'the woman's part' [...] seem merely the conventional textbook variety. [...] Most important, we are made to witness Posthumus' experiencing the guilt, penitence, and forgiveness that other disillusioned husband only mouth. [...] unlike all other husbands in Shakespeare, he forgives his wife for 'wrying but a little' (V.i.5), reasserts her nobility and repents her death *before* her innocence is proved. (183).

As Neely demonstrates, the text offers Posthumus many windows in which “to do penance, to reform and be forgiven,” and makes clear that Posthumus, while not the best man around, remains far from the worst, especially when the scale slopes between a sexual assaulter and a man plotting a vicious rape and murder, and, as Neely points out, this does “make Posthumus' misogyny in his diatribe against ‘the woman's part’ [...] seem merely the conventional textbook variety.” After all, Iachimo, when he invades Imogen's room, compares himself to the rapist Tarquin before kissing the unconscious Imogen and removing some of her clothing. Cloten actually glories in the idea of raping Imogen before murdering her husband:

With that suit upon my back, will I ravish her: first kill him, and in her eyes; there shall she see my valour, which will then be a torment to her contempt. He on the ground, my speech of insultment ended on his dead body, and when my lust hath dined, – which, as I say, to vex her I will execute in the clothes that she so praised, – to the court I'll knock her back, foot her home again. She hath despised me rejoicingly, and I'll be merry in my revenge. (3.5.162-172).

Although Posthumus plans for the murder of his wife, Posthumus treats the murder more as a hard necessity than as a joy. Posthumus never relishes the thought, never plans “a torment” for his wife, never imagines that he will “be merry in [his] revenge.” Cloten actually calls this an act

of “valour,” and he treats this as a chance to enjoy her pain, calling it a chance for his lust to “dine.” Cloten also plots the psychological damage to Imogen of raping her in the garb and guise of her husband. Indeed, after the rape and the murder of her husband before her eyes, Cloten plans to continue the abuse, beating her and driving her home, something Posthumus would never have done. Posthumus never enjoys his cruelty the way these two men do.

Furthermore, in his atonement Posthumus takes *action*, returning to England and engaging in the battle, “experiencing the guilt, penitence, and forgiveness that other disillusioned husband only mouth.” Posthumus must atone for his crimes against his wife and his sexual suspicions in some way, and the play positions this atonement as the main action of the play instead of relegating it to the end of the final scene. However, one must note that unlike some Shakespeare plays where the penance remains very ritualized⁴⁷, Posthumus chooses to redeem himself classically – with blood. He offers his life to the gods⁴⁸ and his wife’s memory not out of a belief that dying for his sins will expiate them and earn him redemption but an understanding that his debt is owed and yet unpaid:

You married ones,
If each of you should take this course, how many
Must murder wives much better than themselves
For wrying but a little! [...]

Gods! if you
Should have ta'en vengeance on my faults, I never
Had lived to put on this: so had you saved
The noble Imogen to repent, and struck
Me, wretch more worth your vengeance. But, alack,
You snatch some hence for little faults; that's love,
To have them fall no more: you some permit

⁴⁷ In *Winter's Tale*, the king publicly mourns for nineteen years, before his wife returns in a pretend magical ritual supposedly awakening a statue.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio publically mourns his supposedly dead fiancée, including hanging a poem epitaph on her tomb and arranging for singing. He also promises to perform the “rite” every year, clearly viewing it as ritual.

⁴⁸ Thorne might have questioned the excellence of the gift. As he said, quoting Moffet, "Posthumus finds his life worthless and desperate until he has offered it to the gods" (157). Maybe he did not value his life exceedingly, but one cannot dispute that it was the best thing he had to offer.

To second ills with ills, each elder worse,
 And make them dread it, to the doers' thrift.
 But Imogen is your own: do your best wills,
 And make me blest to obey! I am brought hither
 Among the Italian gentry, and to fight
 Against my lady's kingdom: 'tis enough
 That, Britain, I have kill'd thy mistress; peace!
 I'll give no wound to thee. Therefore, good heavens,
 Hear patiently my purpose: I'll disrobe me
 Of these Italian weeds and suit myself
 As does a Briton peasant: so I'll fight
 Against the part I come with; so I'll die
 For thee, O Imogen, even for whom my life
 Is every breath a death; and thus, unknown,
 Pitied nor hated, to the face of peril
 Myself I'll dedicate. Let me make men know
 More valour in me than my habits show.
 Gods, put the strength o' the Leonati in me!
 To shame the guise o' the world, I will begin
 The fashion, less without and more within. (5.1.2-5, 7-33)

Posthumus achieves in this speech one of his first remarkable feats of a duped Shakespeare husband – recognizing that he too has sinned, possibly in ways far worse than his wife: “Gods! if you / Should have ta'en vengeance on my faults, I never / Had lived to put on this.” Furthermore, his statement that the gods should have “saved / The noble Imogen to repent, and struck / [Him], wretch more worth [their] vengeance” represents a degree of charity not seen in other abused Shakespearean husbands, a recognition that redemption is possible not only for himself but also for his supposedly erring wife⁴⁹. Although Posthumus does hold somewhat to Othello’s belief that his wife needed to be saved from betraying more men or sinning even more – “You snatch some hence for little faults; that's love, / To have them fall no more” – he now understands that such snatching must be the purview of the gods, not of mortal men. He also affirms that his own death would have been a mercy, that he would give much to have been spared the tragic mistake

⁴⁹ The closest Othello comes to encouraging redemption in his wife is telling his wife to repent before she dies so as not to damn her own soul. He does not, however, actively assist in her redemption, rather leaving a brief window open for her to pursue it. Claudio, for his part, seems to treat Hero’s soul as a lost cause, now that she has slept with a man outside of marriage.

of killing his wife unjustly. The audience sees Posthumus realize something that most Shakespearean men only learn after they discover their wives' innocence: he might be important, but his wounded feelings do not matter as much as someone else's life, at least not enough to give him the right to deprive her of it. He must cede the authority to judge and to condemn to the gods. This realization further changes the quality of his love for her. He loves her now with a love that "vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." He does not have to be the most important person in his marriage, and his feelings do not have to come first. He can accept her, errors and all, and still love her. Much as Imogen does when she mourns his supposed demise, Posthumus finally lets go of his anger and allows his wounded love to take a backseat to the greater picture of his life and her life and their marriage.

Furthermore, his recognition that he lives in a state of further decline and in which even further decline is possible explains his willingness to die. Having recognized his faults, he appears desirous to die lest he betray more women. As for Posthumus' suicide scheme, it appears relatively straightforward, if not as straightforward as simply stabbing himself: return to his homeland and fight on the losing side, where death is surest. Most important, though, are his expressed motives:

so I'll die
For thee, O Imogen, even for whom my life
Is every breath a death; and thus, unknown,
Pitied nor hated, to the face of peril
Myself I'll dedicate.

His death shall be for neither greatness nor glory but for the wife that he betrayed. His atonement, like his love, must be humble, must "vaunteth not itself" and be "not puffed up." He knows he cannot live without this woman – "I'll die / For thee, O Imogen, even for whom my life / Is every breath a death" – and indeed has no intention of doing so. He subjects himself to

Imogen, invoking her name and spirit, “O Imogen,” almost as if she were a goddess. He has let go of pridefulness, ready to “dedicate” himself to her, even after her death.

Furthermore, when his initial plan fails, Posthumus still has a very solid back-up plan: allow himself to be captured by the victorious Britons and wait to be executed either as a Roman or a returned exile. As Harold Bloom describes his fate, "Posthumus, reverting to Roman garb, is captured, and awaits execution, in the willing spirit of expiation" (633). Posthumus intends to use his capture to pay his blood debt to the memory of his wife:

For me, my ransom's death;
On either side I come to spend my breath;
Which neither here I'll keep nor bear again,
But end it by some means for Imogen. (5.3. 89-92).

Posthumus shows himself desirous of death in atonement for his wrongs to his wife, and he does not care overmuch how he pays that debt. This death shall be “for Imogen.” He offers his death as a sacrifice to her spirit, like the sacrifice the Romans he came with would offer their gods. He does not mean just to die in her name; he intends to die for her, to give his death to her as an apology for his crimes against her. Posthumus, himself, appears aware that in arranging for his own execution he goes above and beyond what might usually be deemed necessary for his sins – he certainly surpasses Claudio by planning his demise at all and even surpasses Othello for the clarity and intention with which he arranges for it – however, he does not appear inclined to let himself off easy for his offenses:

Is't enough I am sorry?
So children temporal fathers do appease;
Gods are more full of mercy. Must I repent?
I cannot do it better than in gyves,
Desired more than constrain'd: to satisfy,
If of my freedom 'tis the main part, take
No stricter render of me than my all. [...]
For Imogen's dear life take mine; and though
'Tis not so dear, yet 'tis a life; you coin'd it: [...]

so, great powers,
If you will take this audit, take this life,
And cancel these cold bonds. O Imogen!
I'll speak to thee in silence. (5.4. 13-19, 23-25, 28-31)

Posthumus focuses at this moment on redeeming the debt he owes for Imogen's death: "For Imogen's dear life take mine."⁵⁰ The question then remains what happens after he has squared that debt. The text does not make plain whether Posthumus believes his atonement will save his immortal soul. He believes himself, after all, a murderer, and he has certainly been guilty of the sin of wrath, in addition to whatever penalties might usually be imposed for his sins against his wife. At this point, it would seem, when he tells the gods to "take/ No stricter render of [him] than [his] all" that he does hope that the gods will take his life, but he does not address what should happen to him thereafter. Perhaps he views his damnation already as a foregone conclusion. After all, the only expiation he seems to desire is the forgiveness of Imogen, having paid back the spiritual debt he owes to her – unfortunately, with her supposedly dead, any forgiveness from her does not appear a likely option. Posthumus appears to have realized that only Imogen's love could save him now; he just does not know he has access to it.

Possibly the most surprising part of the redemption cycle comes in what has been commonly thought of as the Deus Ex Machina sequence⁵¹ in Act V Scene iv, in which Jupiter himself confirms that Posthumus' efforts at atonement have actually succeeded in saving him from a tragedy and earning him a happy ending. Were Posthumus to have been less dedicated to redeeming himself, he might have actually been condemned to life alone without his wife, a post-war execution, or even a later, uninterrupted suicide effort. This scene includes Posthumus'

⁵⁰ Unlike in this previously mentioned passage, where the "for Imogen" meant that he desired to *give* his death to Imogen as an offering, here Posthumus invites the gods to *take* his life. He does not intend his death for the gods, but he intends that they should exact it from him to pay for his crimes against Imogen.

⁵¹ Although many critics or commenters refer to this scene as an instance of Deus Ex Machina, Jupiter's actions in this scene are not to save Posthumus or in any way interfere with what Jupiter treats as the pre-determined outcome of the events. Although Posthumus' family plead to the god to intercede, Jupiter reprimands them for thinking the pleading would be necessary or would change his mind. Instead of saving Posthumus, Jupiter mostly points out that Posthumus has already saved himself.

family pleading for him⁵², arguing that Posthumus has lived a good life and does not deserve retribution at the hands of the gods – though they never address whether or not Posthumus would agree with their assessment – and blame Jupiter for failing to shield Posthumus from his errors:

SICILIUS LEONATUS: Hath my poor boy done aught but well, [...]
 Whose father then, as men report
 Thou orphans' father art,
 Thou shouldst have been, and shielded him
 From this earth-vexing smart. [...]
 MOTHER: Since, Jupiter, our son is good,
 Take off his miseries. (5.4. 37, 41-44, 87-88).

These spirits apparently believe, not unlike many critics, that prayer will work. Indeed, these ghosts, in their concern for their kin, grow quite bold, going so far as to insult an angry god and question his divine plan for them and theirs. However, gods being gods, the questioning of the divine will does not go over well; Jupiter largely maintains that mortals, dead or alive, character or audience member, should not question the wisdom of the plan⁵³:

No care of yours it is; you know 'tis ours.
 Whom best I love I cross; to make my gift,
 The more delay'd, delighted. [...]
 His comforts thrive, his trials well are spent. [...]
 He shall be lord of lady Imogen,
 And happier much by his affliction made. (5.4.102-104, 106, 109-110).

Here, Posthumus' afflictions, from the lies of Iachimo to the concealment by Pisanio to the suicide mission in the war, are portrayed as necessary evils for ensuring that he deserves his future happiness. Imogen, previously figured as “the gift of the gods” which “the gods have given [Posthumus]” (1.4.91-93), the audience now learns must be earned, will not simply be given to him: “Whom best I love I cross; to make my gift, /The more delay'd, delighted.” Now

⁵² Posthumus Leonatus bears that name, because his father, Sicilious Leonatus, died before Posthumus' birth. His mother also died during the birth. Therefore, the family members that plead for Posthumus are spirits returned from the underworld to beg for him. Because they never knew their son alive, they call their son their orphan and do blame Jupiter for abandoning what they considered his responsibility to be the father of their child left on earth.

⁵³ Depending on the extent to which one subscribes to the view that the author is god in any work of literature, these comments could simultaneously function as Shakespeare pointing out the audience that they should not question or judge his plans for Posthumus' redemption.

that “his trials well are spent,” Posthumus has done the earning and may now enjoy his just rewards, “happier much by his affliction made.” No matter how much an audience member might question the rationality or wisdom of Posthumus’ intentions for a redemptive suicide, the text treats this decision not only as reasonable but completely indispensable. In this world, nothing, especially not a happily ever after, will simply be handed to a character. Posthumus needs to *earn* his redemption and his happy union through these trials, which taught him the proper way to love his wife and to appreciate the gifts that he has been given.

As one examines the outcome of *Cymbeline*, one can see the way the dissimilarities that Shakespeare established between Posthumus and Imogen and Othello and Desdemona have guided the play towards a different outcome, a different genre. As has been noted by several critics, the nature of tragedy is destruction and loss, and the nature of romance is resurrection and rediscovering:

In the romances, the world is a much more serious place – not, as in the tragedies, because it may betray us, but because it may be lost altogether. The protagonist of Shakespearean romance loses his whole world [...]. But although the world may be lost, it may also be found; and of course the most obvious property of the feminine in this genre is also its tendency to come and go. (Bamber 21).

Posthumus, even more so than Othello, built his world on his wife, and this world he lost when he felt his wife had become unfaithful. He realized for the first time that his whole world “may be lost altogether.” However, he finds his wife again and rediscovers his place in the world: “although the world may be lost, it may also be found.” By forgiving his wife and atoning, Posthumus refocuses himself and the play towards a happier outcome, one in which life can continue. Indeed, the fact that Posthumus has the chance to redirect the play, to reshape the outcome, reflects a different genre sensibility or outcome:

The tragedies take place just as the worst is happening; in the romances the worst has happened and life goes on, creating a sense of free fall [...]. In the tragedies the catastrophe comes at the end of the play; we are simultaneously fighting it and

rushing toward it from the beginning to the end. We are *engaged* with the catastrophe throughout. In the romances the catastrophe comes earlier and is less absorbing. The heroes do not die, as in the tragedies; he merely suffers such terrible losses that his world takes on a kind of posthumous quality. (Bamber 172).

Almost before anything else, Posthumus becomes separated from his wife, and then he loses the rest of her when Iachimo persuades him of the infidelity. He certainly believes “the worst has happened,” and he struggles with the fact that “life goes on.” Indeed, one certainly gets the “sense of free fall” happening in his brain as he struggles with the deep anger and the loss of the secure self that followed. Posthumus’ attack against his wife comes early in the play, allowing him the chance to atone for his crimes against his marriage and allowing the audience the chance to experience his struggle to come back from the catastrophe. Furthermore, unlike Othello, Posthumus does not die to make amends for his crime, although he proves himself entirely willing to do so. He lives to suffer his loss in a world with what can very aptly be described as having a “posthumous quality.”

However, unlike *Othello*, in which the stress of saving the couple fell to the wife, who tried so hard to save her husband from himself, in *Cymbeline*, the effort to save the couple falls primarily on the husband. Most of Imogen’s responsibility appears to be forgiving her husband from his failings when the time comes, after he has demonstrated that he understands that he has done wrong, without ever seeking him out to save him from his errors. Posthumus becomes responsible for saving himself and there by their marriage. Posthumus relearns how to love someone, and in doing so, he learns how to save the marriage. Posthumus learns to love his wife in a way that accepts greatness but also weakness, that encourages but also forgives. Once Posthumus has learned this lesson, has learned how he failed in his first attempt at the marriage, he can begin the course of atonement that ensures that he will ready to meet with his wife again,

not to mention creating the possibility that he can meet with her again, as they only come to be in the same place because he went to the war.

Some critics allow themselves to be distracted by the role that violence plays in the creation of the happy ending. These critics note, for example, that Posthumus' first interactions with his wife include his punching her in the face: "His violence here literally enables their reunion – Pisanio reveals Imogen's identity only because he thinks Posthumus may have killed her" (Adelman 209). Adelman refers, of course, to Posthumus' reaction to Fidele (Imogen in drag-disguise) trying to comfort him in his mourning for Imogen's murder:

IMOGEN: Peace, my lord; hear, hear –
 POSTHUMUS LEONATUS: Shall's have a play of this? Thou scornful page,
 There lie thy part.
 Striking her: she falls
 PISANIO: O, gentlemen, help!
 Mine and your mistress! O, my lord Posthumus!
 You ne'er kill'd Imogen til now. (5.5.266-271).

However, Adelman places too much emphasis on the attack. First of all, Posthumus did not realize that he struck his wife. She was still dressed in drag at the time, he still believed her dead, and he thought he struck a page making light of his murdering his wife, which he took very seriously. Second, the truth, though revealed following the attack, would have been revealed anyway. Considering the fact that she had come forward to interrupt his lamentations, Imogen was doubtless on the point of revealing herself when Posthumus struck her. Though Posthumus fights and intends to die in a war, the focus of the play and the redemption of the characters' derives from his remorse and forgiveness and not from the bloodshed or violence.

It remains important to note that, in the end, the play is not about suffering, it is about redemption. Through his struggles, Posthumus has learned a new way of love, one based on humility, trust, and acceptance. He has learned a love more conducive to an actual marriage, an actual commitment, an actual life together. After Posthumus' anguish and Imogen's struggle, the

couple, their marriage, and their country, are restored to greatness: “the emphasis is upon restoration and redemption of others who are worthy, and the long concluding scene of the play presents a sequence of discoveries and regenerative experiences for those who figure significantly in the action, experiences which work for the good of the nation as a whole” (Thorne 149). Imogen, through her steadfast fidelity to her husband and her eventual willingness to overlook his errors, proves herself “worthy.” Posthumus, through his remorse and his willingness to sacrifice himself in atonement, shows himself as well “worthy.” Indeed, most of the weight for demonstrating their worth as a couple falls to him. By demonstrating this worthiness, the couple earn their happier ending and shifts themselves away from tragedy.

Although *Cymbeline* has been mistaken for a lesser quality version of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, such a reading overlooks the way in which the play’s characters and their actions redirect the play’s plot and final outcome and thereby the genre. Were *Cymbeline* just another *Othello*, Imogen would simply be another graceful Desdemona, without her new edge of steel and willingness to question and condemn her spouse, a behavioral shift that places the emphasis for redeeming the couple on the actions and behavior of her spouse. Were *Cymbeline* just another *Othello*, Posthumus would be angrier and more efficient, more likely to kill his wife in person rather than to have her killed, more likely to actually murder his wife before he could feel the weight of his remorse, and he would have been less likely to engage in the suicide mission built on redemption prior to demise. Were *Cymbeline* just another *Othello*, the plays would not turn out, in the end, as differently as they do.

Conclusion

If we read stories or watch plays to hear the stories we tell about ourselves or to gain a deeper understanding of our world, we must ask what audiences are meant to learn from Shakespeare's repeated stories of infidelities. If the plays pose the same question over and over again, one must assume that to arrive at an answer to that question without overlooking certain facets considered by Shakespeare, a reader will need to consider these plays together.

This thesis has taken in hand the above notions for examining plays and looked for what these plays can say about each other and about relationships like those that build their core. There emerged in these plays a way of thinking that explains how some couples in Shakespeare facing the issue of supposed infidelities could arrive at wedded bliss while other couples that started in a similar situation end in death.

These plays involve a struggle between love and violence. Jealousy and mistrust, themselves already problematic in any relationship, cause violence and assaults against the female partner of these relationships. In these three plays, violence takes many forms. Violence comes in the shape of the repudiation and reputation-destruction by Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*. It takes the form of domestic abuse – physical and verbal – and murder by Othello in his eponymous play. They include slander and the arranging of a murder by Posthumus in *Cymbeline*. Readers will acknowledge that not all forms of violence present in these plays can be considered equal or equivalent. Publically breaking with a woman does not compare with smothering her on the marital bed. Eventually, an act of violence goes too far and makes the character somehow irredeemable in the eyes of the reader, the audience, or the other characters. Once the offenses move the assailant so far, nothing will be able to help him, and tragedy will be assured. The audience saw this effect in Othello's murder of his wife, putting him irrevocably

beyond the reach of her love and forgiveness, her capacity to save him from himself and from Iago. Although these men do not create their own jealousy, although they are not alone in perpetrating violent acts in these plays, and although they are not alone in the suspicions of inconstancy, these men, through their mistrust and their violent reactions, create the problems in their relationship, and these problems need mitigation, if the couple can have any hope of coming towards a happy ending.

The necessary redemptions are created from the love that underlies the relationship. The audience always finds this love in the female characters. Hero accepts that Claudio has been weak, and she never appears to hold it against him. Desdemona struggles until the end to save Othello from himself, and she even uses her dying breath to forgive him for his violence against her, to steer him if not herself towards a happier (well, less tragic) ending. Imogen, for her part, admits some anger towards her husband, but she remains ready to accept him and welcome him back into her arms when he has shown himself aware of his errors and deeply remorseful. Of course, the love does not prove entirely to be the province of one gender. Posthumus demonstrates a stunning level of love, accepting his wife even when he has no reason to believe that she never betrayed him. His love of his wife guides *Cymbeline* towards its happy conclusion. One sees in two of these three plays the power of love to redeem, to save. However, in the couple that does not survive, in Othello and Desdemona, one sees the crushing failure that can result from an unequal balance of love in a relationship. In a one-sided relationship, no matter how pure and perfect that one love is, it cannot conquer the violence attacking the union, especially when the violence reaches such an overwhelming pitch. The surest support for a marriage, then, we find, must be a good strong love on both sides.

In the end, when a reader watches this sort of arc unfold, the reader doubtless asks what Shakespeare could have been aiming at. In the simplest terms, though it smacks something of the hippie: Love is good; trust is good; faith is good. Love cannot help but be a faith-based initiative. As all of these men discover, love can never truly be tested to one's satisfaction. One must simply come to the conclusion that one will trust that person, will have faith in that person, will love that person. One must not act aggressively or violently against one's partner, even in response to suspicions or weakening in one's own faith. Marriages, all relationships really, cannot survive without love, a love built on mutual trust and respect, instead of just sexual fidelity. A relationship with such a love on both sides, both partners for each other, can overcome the jealousy and suspicion that plagues the couples of *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, and *Cymbeline*.

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